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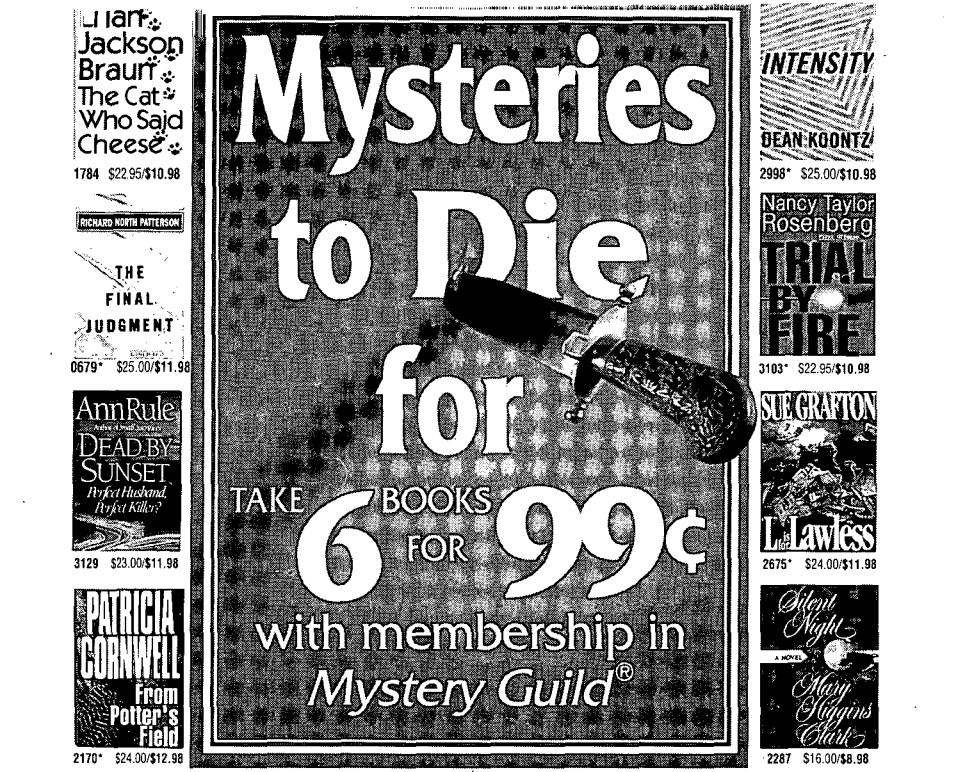

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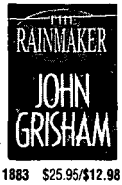

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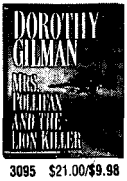

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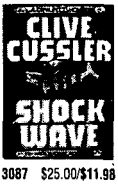

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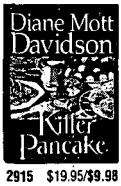

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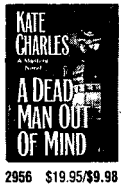

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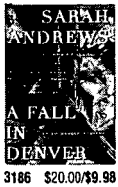

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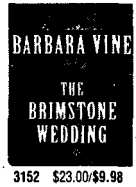

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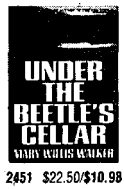

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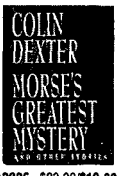

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MEETING OF THE MINDS

by Benjamin M. Schutz

Vernon Bigelow came over the rise and could not believe his good luck. It was on him like one of his spells, and he had to double-clutch and downshift or he'd have blown right on past.

He pulled his rig off the road and came up behind the metal-flake blue Firebird. A white rag was tied to the antenna. He sat in the cab and looked for the driver. Not in the car, not up ahead. He glanced in his rearview mirrors. Nothing behind him. He turned off the engine, reached down and grabbed a short iron bar from next to his seat, and unlocked the door. You can't be too careful, he reminded himself. Being a good Samaritan got a lot of people killed, and he wasn't going to be one of them. He jumped down from the cab and walked around its big red hood, patting it like it was the nose of his number one dog. He put almost a hundred thousand miles a year on this rig and it had brought him some mighty profitable loads, mighty profitable indeed.

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Vernon walked alongside the Firebird. Low and wide, its body gleamed and sparkled like a giant beetle. Nobody in the backseat sleeping, no "Call the Police" card in the rear window.

Just a pair of big old custom speakers in each rear corner.

He felt the hood. Cool. It had been here awhile.

Vernon looked up and down the road and saw no one. The sun was in retreat and would vanish in thirty minutes. Orange and purple pastels smeared the bellies of the clouds above.

There wasn't much traffic on this road at high noon, he mused; after dark there wouldn't be any at all. Thirty miles in either direction to the nearest towns. Nothing but woods and fields on either side. A farmhouse now and then back off the road. Tobacco and corn hadn't been taken in yet, but the cotton was all gone. Fluffs of white all over the ground, debris after the pickers had been through.

Vern pulled the driver's handle. The door was unlocked. He opened it and looked inside. No car phone, no CB. Behind the front seat was an old rag and an empty plastic grocery bag. Vern took one last look around, put the bar in his pocket, and ducked his head inside. He popped open the compartment between the bucket seats. A couple of maps, some napkins, a pencil, a petrified mint, and the car's papers. The shifter curved up from the floor like a giant metal talon with an eightball impaled on the end of it.

Vern opened the pouch of papers. All the warranties were on one side. The other had the safety inspections, the emissions inspections, the insurance ID card, and the registration. He started to pull that out.

For nearly twenty years, Benjamin Schutz has worked as a clinical and forensic psychologist, an occupation that has given him many insights into the workings of the criminal mind. During the mid 1980s, he launched a series of novels about private eye Leo Haggerty which earned a Shamus Award from the Private Eye Writers of America (see *A Tax in Blood*). In 1993 he won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for his short story "Mary Mary, Shut the Door."

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"God, am I glad to see you."

Spooked, Vern jerked himself upright and reached for the iron bar in his pocket.

"Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me," he yelled back at the woman standing in the field facing him.

"Sorry 'bout that," she yelled back.

"Where the hell were you?" he asked.

"In the woods. I couldn't wait any longer. Must be my lucky day. I was sure I'd leave and somebody'd come by and just keep on goin'. I've been standing out there with my thumb out for forty-five minutes."

She high-stepped it across the soft ground, gingerly crossed the ditch by the side of the road, and then stood on the other side of the car.

Vern wished he'd seen her by the side of the road, thumb out. He'd a pulled over, unlocked the door, and helped her into the cab. She'd get in, flash him a smile, thank him for being so kind. He'd tell her this was no place for a girl to be all alone. What with it getting dark and all. He wished he'd seen her like that, but this was all right too. She had on a pair of bluejean shorts, tight, with the bottoms rolled up, and a white blouse pulled up under her breasts and tied in a knot, so her stomach showed. She could have been tighter, but she was okay. Her breasts looked like they were okay, too. Soft, but not too droopy, big but not too big. Hell, what was he thinking, he couldn't remember a breast that wasn't okay.

Vern reminded himself not to stare, it put people off, and asked, "What's wrong with your car?"

"I don't know. It ain't my car."

"Well, let's open her up and see what's wrong."

Vern reached under the dashboard and released the hood.

He walked around the car to the front, pulled up the hood until the hydraulic support rod caught. He wiped his hands on his jeans and stuck one out.

"My name's Vern, Vern Bigelow. What's yours?"

The woman didn't take his hand. She took a step back and Vern noticed her right hand was in her purse.

"Okay." He flashed a big grin. "That's cool. You should be cautious, out here all alone, broken down, me a stranger, things bein' the way they are these days." He held up his hands. "Why don't you go on over there a ways, keep on going until you feel safe, and I'll look under the hood here. Okay?"

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She took a couple of steps back, so that she could easily keep the car between them.

Vern scanned the car's engine for anything obvious. "Can't see anything wrong. Why don't you get inside and turn it on?" He'd been watching her out of the corner of his eye the whole time. What was in her purse? he wondered.

She came around the far side of the car, then in two long strides slid into the front seat and locked the door.

Vern came around the hood. "Turn the engine on. If you don't do that I can't tell what's wrong."

She just sat there staring at him, doing nothing.

"Lady, if you don't turn the car on, I can't help you."

Still nothing.

Vern looked around. It was dark now. He couldn't even see a house light in any direction. He walked up to the front window and leaned over.

"Tell you what. You just sit in there with your hand in your purse. What are you gonna do, spray perfume in my face? I'm gonna go back to my truck and leave you here. While I'm driving down the road, I'm gonna be thinking about how scared you must be and it'd be pretty mean to leave you out here all alone. That might lead me to stop in town and call the police and have them come out and pick you up. Then again, I might start thinking about how you wouldn't even do me the courtesy of starting your car when you were all locked up safe inside, and all I was trying to do was help you. I spend too much time thinking like that and I know I won't stop anywhere and call anyone."

Vernon stood up and turned to walk away.

He spun back, pulled the iron rod from his pocket, and swung it ferociously at the glass. Inside, the woman threw her hands up in front of her face and screamed.

Vern tapped the glass lightly. "One last thought. This glass won't protect you. When they say shatterproof, it just means the glass won't explode in on you and cut you or blind you when someone hits it, like with an iron rod, or a baseball bat, or a hammer, or a rifle butt, and then pushes the glass out of the way to reach in and pull you out through the window."

Vern smiled, pleased with himself. "Just thought you'd want to know that before I leave."

He walked back to his truck, unlocked the door, took a step up, and swung himself into his chair like he was mounting a horse.

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He put the rod back in its place and turned on his lights. Dumb broad, serve her sorry ass right if something happened to her, he thought. Something real bad. She didn't know common decency when it fell out of the sky on her. Decent people knew decency when they saw it, 'cause they practiced it. You couldn't appreciate what you didn't practice. Vern Bigelow knew that to be the truth.

Vern turned his engine on, checked his rearview mirror, and prepared to follow his headlights, his own personal moons, into the darkness. There was a pounding on his other door. Vern leaned over and looked down. It was her. He opened the door.

She brushed a wayward swatch of dark red hair out of her face and then raked it back with inch-long crimson nails. It hung down her back in a long braid, like a bell pull.

"First, you gotta . . ."

"Garnet Simms, but everyone calls me Red," she said, taking his hand and climbing in beside him. No smile. No thank you, Vern noted.

"That's pretty fortunate, you turning out to have red hair and all."

"Not really. All the kids in my family got red hair. My mother was running out of names — Scarlett, Ruby, Rusty, Rose — by the time I came along. That's enough about me. What's your name again?"

"Vern, Vern Bigelow."

"How'd you happen to be coming up this godforsaken road, Vern? I'd just about lost hope of ever being picked up. You ain't haulin'."

"No. I just dropped a load in Weldon. Going to pick up a sealed one down at Morehead City, at the port there. Figured I'd take the scenic route. I spend most of my time on the interstates. You from around here?"

"Why do you ask?" she said, turning to face him.

"No reason. But like you said, this ain't a main road or nothing. I don't ever see much traffic here, except other rigs that are overweight and late, bypassing the stations, and locals. Locals, it's just out one driveway, up the road a couple of miles to another driveway."

"No. I ain't from around here."

Vern finished looking Garnet over. She was wearing clunky platform shoes. He hated them when they first came around, and he still hated them. Damned ugly things to find at the end of a

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woman's legs. She had no rings on her fingers. Funny, what with her spending so much time on those nails. That bag of hers was a regular satchel.

Garnet let him check her out, and when he got to her face she gave him one of her starter smiles. One without any teeth or dimple to it.

She hadn't checked herself out in a mirror, except in the Firebird, since early in the afternoon. Her hair needed to be brushed back and refastened. She hated it when it got in her face. If it was up to her, she'd have chopped it all off. But then things weren't always up to her, were they?

Garnet knew she wasn't pretty. She was attractive. That was a bit more than plain, which beat ugly by a long shot, but still short of pretty. With pretty you didn't have to work so hard, you could coast along behind pretty. She knew plenty of girls who did that. Beautiful? Beautiful killed her. It was a crime, being beautiful. Like stealing. She'd thought about plastic surgery for a while. If God shafted you, you could always do it yourself. But surgery was expensive. She knew. She'd looked into it and Garnet was no closer to having that kind of money than the day she'd left home.

No, attractive was just a slight pull, like two real tiny magnets. You had to boost that signal. Fortunately there were lots of boosters around. Clothes, your walk, bad habits, smiles, touching their hands for no reason, letting them help you with everything, makeup, giggles, certain ways of looking at them, listening to their every stupid word. Enough of that and they didn't see the crooked teeth, the acne that ruined your junior year, the overbite, the nose that was too something, every damn thing that didn't add up to pretty.

Vern smiled back. That was better, he thought. A thank you would have been in order, but he'd let that pass.

"Your car all locked up?"

"Yeah, but I told you it wasn't my car."

"Okay, your boyfriend's then."

"It ain't my boyfriend's neither. I didn't turn it over 'cause I didn't have the keys!"

"Then what were you doin' out here?"

"I told you. I was hitchhiking. I hadn't got a ride in almost an hour. I've been walking up the road, thumb out. I had to go so I hiked back into the woods. That Firebird was here when I got here. You saw that rag on the antenna. Something broke down,

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the guy probably got a ride to town to get it towed and ain't come back yet. That's all. I figured I'd hang around awhile, try to cop a ride when he got back. Then you showed up, and got all pissy."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were a bitch and here I was, just trying to be helpful. You could have said all that."

"Yeah, well, you were right about me being out here by myself. I was scared. So I just locked myself in. Your little trick with the pipe didn't help none neither."

"Yeah, well, sometimes I just go off, I guess. I didn't hurt you though. I just wanted to make a point. Let you know you weren't being so smart, you know."

Garnet smiled. "Let's just let bygones be bygones, Vern. What do you say? Start over?" She held out her hand.

Vern smiled back. This was gonna turn out okay. "Sure. Let's start over. My name's Vern, can I give you a lift somewhere, little lady?" He shook her hand and felt the edge of her nails as they slid across his palm.

"Thank you, Vern, my name's Garnet, and I sure would appreciate a ride."

Vern put the Kenworth in gear, pulled around the Firebird, and headed towards Scotland Neck. Behind them the crows and starlings were settling silently into the trees.

Vern got comfortable, put both hands on the wheel, and drove smoothly down highway 301. Garnet scanned the cab, careful not to let her eyes light on him. She thought he'd be real sensitive about that. The cab was clean and bare, not like most she'd been in. No candy wrappers, beer cans, ripped maps, magazines, or crap on the floor. No pictures taped to the visors. Some smiling cow hefting her breasts like the catch of the day to look at when the sun was too much to face.

Vern was trying to ignore her, she concluded. Most guys started asking stupid questions right after she got in. Couldn't just let her ride, had to know all about her. Sometimes she rolled the window down and leaned her head out. Her hair streamed away, like it did with drowned bodies. She felt the tug and tingle along her scalp, behind her ears.

Vern was different. Silent, contained, not eager to know her, probe her with questions. Just let her be. She took the time to map him with her eyes. He had funny hands, pink, clean, and hairless, like he washed them a lot. Most men went to her straight

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from the toilet or from under the hood, like her skin was no different than porcelain or cast iron.

Hard to read his face with that beard. A regular wolfman. Not a speck of skin showing from his throat to his nostrils.

"You want any music?" Vern asked.

"Uh, that's okay . . ." she stammered.

Vern turned the radio on. They were between signals. He hit the Seek button. Tony Bennett crooned into the cab. Vern grimaced and hit the button again. Rap bounced off the windows. "God, I hate that stuff," Garnet said and shuddered. Vern agreed and sought another channel. "Police report a . . ." Garnet reached to change the channel but Vern beat her to it.

"I hate the news. News sucks. Nothing but bad news on it. Who wants to listen to that anyway. Long as it ain't happenin' to me, I don't need to know. You know what I mean?" Vern stared straight through Garnet, looking for an answer she didn't have.

"Yeah. I guess so. I don't know. Sometimes it's interesting, what's going on out there. You know, you hear about things, maybe makes you a little more cautious. Maybe you can avoid something bad."

"Trust me. Bad news doesn't work that way. If it's out there, it's got your name on it and it's gonna find you no matter what. Shit happens and there is no explaining it. End of story."

Garnet looked out the window. She knew he was right. She knew it with a certitude that grew each and every day.

Scotland Neck came and went in less than a minute. A downshift series, a right, then a left, and it was all behind them.

"Hamilton's next, then Williamston. Where are you going to?" Vern asked.

"Morehead sounds good. I'd like to see the ocean."

"Well la-de-da. Aren't we something. Ain't you got somewhere to be?"

"No. I go where I want to, when I want to. Like my mother said, I'm free, white, and twenty-one. Nobody can tell me what to do."

"Free, white, and twenty-one. Don't you got life by the tail?"

"I ain't saying that, it's just I ain't got anywhere I got to be. You said you were heading to Morehead and I thought I'd like to see the ocean."

"Don't you have a job?"

"No. I got fired. That's why I was hitching. I was gonna go back home. But, the more I thought about it, that wasn't such a good

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idea. I'd just have to listen to my folks go off on me about what a loser I am. But you came along, and now I can go sit on the beach and listen to the ocean. I'd rather do that. I can always get another job."

"What were you doing?"

"I was waitressing. Slavery for white folks. My boss thought I should be nice to him for four twenty-five an hour. I thought he should try living with nine fingers. Like you said, end of story."

Hamilton at night was invisible. Vern blew past the Reduce Speed sign, caught a green on the only light in town, and was gone. Twenty miles later they snaked through Williamston, past the peanut farms, the homes with the wraparound porches, the Piggly Wiggly store, down to the intersection with the coast highway.

Garnet leaned her head against the window and began to drift off. She'd been on the road since early that morning.

"You getting tired?" Vern asked hopefully.

"I guess. It's been a long day."

Vern pointed back over his shoulder. "Got a bed in the back. You could take a nap. I'll wake you when we get to Morehead."

Garnet mulled that over. "No, that's okay. We can't be that far from Morehead. What is it, an hour and a half?"

"About that. You sure? It's a comfortable bed. Nice and soft."

"No thanks. But I appreciate the offer. You use it often?"

Vern shrugged. "Now and then. It's nice to have right there if you need it. Just pull over to the side of the road. Climb in, lock everything up, and it's your own private hideaway. You can do what you want. I don't do a lot of interstate hauling, but I'll pull a double, back to back, Asheville to New Bern, and spend an overnight at a truck stop. If I'm on my way home after a run like that, I'll just pull over to the side of the road and check out for a while."

Garnet slipped a long crimson nail inside her lips and ran it over the edge of her canine tooth. "You married?"

Vern shook his head.

"You must get lonely out here, driving all the time by yourself, place to place, nobody to go home to."

"I didn't say that," Vern snapped.

"I'm sorry. I guess I just figured . . ."

"Well, you figured wrong. You asked if I was married. I ain't. That don't mean I'm by myself."

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"Sure. You're right. I got that wrong." Garnet put her palms up in surrender.

They drove on in silence towards the town of Washington. The moon shone down on the cotton that littered the fields like ripped Kleenex. Vern wished he was back in the mountains. The snow-covered mountains that rose like the spine of a great beast whose white skin showed through its thick black fur.

A police car passed them going the other way in Washington. It had so many antennas it looked like a fishing boat. Vern and Garnet eyed it as it approached and then each followed it in a side-view mirror. Vern caught Garnet checking him out. He smiled the way his mother taught him to. The one he used when he'd done something wrong and his father's rage was en route, being delivered long distance by his good right arm.

"Sorry I snapped at you like that, you weren't wrong. I just don't want to talk about it."

"That's okay. I was just making conversation." Garnet grinned. She hoped it disarmed him.

Vanceboro passed, then New Bern. They crossed the Neuse River, passed the signs for Tyron Palace, and took Carolina 70 towards Morehead City and the ocean. As the outskirts of New Bern receded, they entered the Croatan Forest. Twenty-one years ago a man came into this forest and buried his family there. Dogs dug them up a couple of days later, as it was a shallow grave. He was in quite a hurry, people said. They never found him though. Croatan was an awfully big forest, Vern remembered.

On the edge of the forest a neon yellow arrow pointed into the trees. Garnet followed the arrow to a trailer in a clearing. A single bulb dangled from a branch over the corrugated siding. Its cone revealed the word "Girls" in plump, hot-pink letters on the trailer door. Rule number one, she thought, in heaven there will be no double-wides.

Havelock began with a long, half-empty strip shopping center, then some fast-food places, an enormous pawnshop, and culminated with the entrance to the air base.

"We're almost there," Vern said. "Twenty minutes maybe."

"Great. Drop me off at a motel. Someplace cheap, okay?"

"Hell, you don't need to do that. You can use the cab."

"Uh, no thanks," she said. The courtesy spread thin over a cringe.

"Hey, I'm just trying to be nice. I'm pretty wired. My pickup isn't

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until two tomorrow. I'm gonna get something to eat, chew the fat with the guys, probably go to a bar, play some pool, maybe cards. I don't usually crash until six. Catch some z's until noon. Load up and hit the road. You'd have the cab to yourself. Lock yourself in." Vern shook his head. "Christ, you sure got a suspicious mind. I mean, if I'd wanted to hurt you, I had plenty of chances to do it by now, right? I mean, look at you. You're half my size."

Garnet burned at that indignity. She was a giant, a huge storm of a woman, trapped in this tiny body. It was somebody else's body, not hers. She could escape it, but not for long. It always found her in the end. Someday she would lose this body for good. She would be big. Very big.

"And don't flatter yourself, anyway," he sneered.

"Screw you too, Vern. I was going to apologize and just say I needed a shower, I feel pretty crummy, and I'm not a good sleeper. I toss and turn a lot. Your cab is just too small and I wouldn't want to inconvenience you. But now I'm not going to say that at all. I'm tired of your being nice and having to get a pat on the back for it all the time, like you're always doing everybody such a big favor. I mean, picking up a hitchhiker, one-half your size if I remember correctly, isn't like finding a cure for cancer, you know. So thank you very much and let me out here."

Vern pressed his foot down on the accelerator as he ground his teeth together. Harder, faster, harder, faster.

"Fine. You win. Don't let me out here. Kill us both instead. That's pretty bright."

Vern froze his rage. Huge molten flares of lava, trapped inside him. Brittle, hard, with nowhere to go. Brighter than you think, bitch. Run your goddamn mouth. Get all them smart words out, now. That ain't what's gonna be coming out soon. Everybody thinks they're so damn smart and Vern Bigelow's so damned dumb. God, I love being underestimated, he thought. Please, go on there, all smug and self-righteous. You got all the answers, huh? Oh, wait till you hear my questions.

Vern relaxed and the truck slowed down. "No, I'm not going to just let you out here. I said I'd give you a ride to Morehead City and that's exactly what I'm going to do. There's going to be no doubt that I'm a man of my word," he said without looking at Garnet.

Ten minutes later, Garnet murmured, "Thank you," to the windshield.

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Morehead City began to coalesce along the roadside, first with small businesses, then large warehouses taking advantage of low rents. Discount furniture, self-storage places, flea markets. The motels came with gas stations and fast food attached.

"Here, this is fine, right here," Garnet said, pointing to a one-story concrete L. Doors and windows alternated as drearily as days and nights would inside them. Skinny metal poles supported an overhang that had peeling shingles sitting up like a bad toupee in the wind. The office was at the far end of the lot.

Vern turned in and stopped his rig. "Listen, you and I haven't hit it off real good, and every time I say something you turn it upside down and look for something else in it. But I'm gonna do it one more time 'cause I'm just like that. Why don't you let me go down and register in the office. Just for myself. That way he won't know there's a woman down here all by herself. You're awfully skittish about things and I'm just thinking this way you're a lot less likely to get hassled by any of his friends, have something bad happen to you." Vern stared straight ahead in mock deference, mock formality.

"That's a very good idea, Vern. I appreciate that. Thank you."

"Okay, why don't you just scrunch down here so he can't see you and wait until I come back."

Garnet crouched below the window level as Vern rolled the rig slowly toward the office. He parked under a burned-out light and stepped down from the cab.

Five minutes later, he climbed back in, backed out, and drove around the corner. He parked in the last spot, in front of door number one. He asked for the room farthest from the road because he was such a poor sleeper. The manager nodded, knowing what that was like.

"Okay, wait until I open the door. I'll come back to get my bags out of the cab. You slide out and go in with me. In this darkness, nobody'll see you."

Garnet whispered, "Thanks."

Vern left the cab door open, opened the room up, and pushed the door wide. The blinds were drawn across the small front window. He'd put on the light when they were both inside. He walked back to the cab. "Okay, c'mon out," he whispered and reached up to grab Garnet's waist to help her down. She pushed across the seats, legs first, and felt him reach for her and hold her in his strong arms. Her legs slid down towards the ground. She was glad

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she wore shorts and not a skirt. Skirts betrayed you. They wouldn't keep still. As soon as her feet hit the ground she moved past Vern, free of his grip but still in his shadow. Up close, he was bigger than she'd thought.

Vern closed the door and they lockstepped across the sidewalk into the room.

Vern closed the door behind them. Garnet's shape emerged from the darkness. Thin strips of light were lashed across her from her waist to her scalp. She was bound by the thinnest of cords, Vern thought.

"Please turn on the light," she whispered, ruining the moment.

Vern flicked on the lights. Garnet released the grip on her bag and it slid around on her hips. She looked the room over. The walls were an avocado green. The carpet was a brown that could go six months without being vacuumed and nobody'd notice.

It was reassuring. She'd spent many a night in motels like this. Even worked a few days in them as a housekeeper. Little chain dangling from the door frame, copy of the innkeepers law posted on the door. Who writes that shit, she wondered. Probably the same guy who wrote the mattress tag.

"Seems nice enough," Vern said and walked over to the bathroom. He flicked on the light. "You got the basics," he said over his shoulder.

"Oh joy. Has the toilet been sanitized?" she asked.

Vern lifted the seat. "Your seal of protection is intact."

They both laughed. Vern looked back at Garnet, her eyes narrowed, her mouth open. Her head lifted back, the cords of her neck stood out. He liked watching women's faces. They were so expressive. Not like men's. Theirs were masks: flat, cold, closed. He'd seen so many expressions on so many faces. Laughter was nice, but it was not his favorite.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked.

"Hey, don't worry about it. Why don't we go out, get a bottle, come back, kick back and relax."

"No thanks, really. How much do I owe you for the room?"

Vern flicked his eyes around. Could she get to the door before he did? Was there anything she could throw at him?

No, not even an ashtray. How about the Bible? He looked down and pulled open the nightstand drawer. There it was. Must be an army of them Gideons running around. How come he never met any of them?

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Vern slid forward between the bed and the dresser. Closer, closer. His eyes on hers. This was one of the best parts. Snake and mouse time. Every bad dream comes true, every fear is realized. The pit opens right up under your feet, the ground melts away. That sweet moment of realization of just how wrong your life has gone. Not so smart now, are you?

Garnet moved toward him. She arched her back a little, just enough to move her breasts a little, get him to notice them.

Vern stopped and looked at her. She was close enough to touch. He watched her breast rise and fall with her breath, the swell of her hips in her shorts. He was breathing through his mouth and stopped to swallow.

"Maybe that isn't such a bad idea after all. We'll get something to drink, come back here, and figure out what I owe you. I'm sure we'll figure something out, right Vern?"

Garnet leaned forward and put her hand on Vern's collar, patting it and then his chest. Vern reached for her and his face bore down on hers. She gritted her teeth and turned away. The smell. It was always there. They couldn't wash it off. She couldn't wash it off. She was going to vomit.

"Um, look, Vern, why don't you get comfortable on the bed here, put on some TV. Let me go freshen up a minute. It's been a long day. I'm hot and sticky. I'll feel better. Just give me a minute, okay?"

"Okay. Sure, go on, freshen up. I'll wait here." He stepped aside and Garnet scooted past him into the bathroom and closed the door.

Vern sat on the edge of the bed, picked up the remote control, and switched on the television. Preoccupied, he began changing channels. He looked around the room. He never did it in rooms. Always his cab, his lair, his den. Alone, private, safe. Dark and close. He did much of it by feel anyway. So, maybe this time he'd do the easy stuff here. She seemed willing enough. It had never happened that way. He wasn't sure he'd like it as much. Only one way to find out. He'd still finish her in the cab. Had to be that way. They'd seen him check in. But they hadn't seen her. He nodded and smiled at his own cleverness.

Garnet threw up in the toilet, then flushed it. She washed her face with water and looked into the mirror. *There's no way out of here. There's no other way.* She knew it. She'd looked into his eyes and seen it there. He was going to do it whether she wanted to or

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not. Just because he wanted to and he was bigger. He could make her do it. Just like they all could. Like they all had. It was now or never.

Vern stopped changing channels when he recognized the car. Metal-flake blue with a white rag on the antenna. The bathroom door slammed open and Garnet rushed at him. He turned and stood to meet her. She had something in her hand. A dumbbell. He raised his arm, but too late. She hit him with all her might and detonated a darkness all around him.

Vern came to. He was on the bed. God, did his head hurt. He moved it slowly from side to side. He was alone. She got away. Thank God he hadn't tried anything. Even if she went to the police, there was nothing they could do. He never touched her. He was innocent. This had happened before, missed attempts. None this close though. Usually something spooked them before he closed, and they ran. I wonder what time it is? He tried to read his watch but his arm wouldn't turn. Vern tried harder and realized he was cuffed to the bed. He tried the other arm. Trapped! He turned his head from side to side even though his head exploded each time.

Garnet came out of the bathroom. She sat on the bed and pulled her bag into her lap. The TV was still on. She took the remote control and searched for the late news.

"Police outside of Weldon found the body of local automobile racer George Reynolds in the woods near his car today. He is the latest victim of the serial killer working the North Carolina back roads."

Vern strained to turn his head toward the TV. "What are you gonna do? What are you gonna do?" His voice rose.

Garnet pinched his nostrils shut and then stuffed George Reynolds's underpants into his mouth.

"What am I going to do?" she said dreamily, and looked around for the little body she had once again managed to escape. "Let me show you." She opened her purse and spread out her answer on the nightstand. ●

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LOVE NOR MONEY

by David Delman

People change in ten years, of course, and she had. I mean, twenty-eight to thirty-eight makes a difference. From across the hotel lobby I could see that her hair had darkened, closer to honey blonde now than cornsilk, and her bearing was . . . I don't know . . . more self-assured. Not that she'd ever really lacked poise; it's just that I was impressed with how still she stood while talking to young Mamie Haycroft, the Black Rock Inn's pretty little desk clerk. Once that kind of stillness would have been hard for her. All that energy to harness. All that drive and hunger for excitement to be tamped down. But now she was quiet, and elegant as hell in a short black dress sophisticated enough to have poor Mamie bug-eyed.

History often figures in David Delman's long fiction, as in his 1993 novel *The Bluestocking*, which was based on the scandalous 1851 divorce trial of actor Edwin Forest and his English wife Catherine. For shorter works, the Philadelphia writer more often chooses a contemporary setting. The following story is the second installment in a series he plans for ex-FBI agent Roy Loomis and his cousin, newspaper owner LaMar Hunnicut.

Close as we'd once been, it still took me five, six seconds to recognize her, but that was partly because I'd been looking for someone named Melissa Burgoyne, which ten years ago had not been her name.

Something . . . an instinct all good cops have and never lose . . . made her suddenly aware she was being studied. She turned from Mamie to me, and — give her credit — her grin was instant and huge. Lickety-split, she was across the room, hugging me fit to kill. She felt good against me. No change there.

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She stepped back for the sake of perspective. "Mmmm," she said.

I returned the compliment in kind. And then got down to business: "Melissa?"

She looked at her watch. "If we can meet later, I'll buy you a drink and explain."

"Did Mamie give you your message?"

"Mamie?"

"That spellbound young 'un over there."

She grinned. "Oh. Mamie. No, she didn't get around to actual messages. Mamie's me revisited. At eighteen, she hates her life and is convinced she's seen all there's to be of it."

"She tell you that?"

"Yes. But she didn't have to." A gentle punch on the shoulder. "You remember me, Roy. I intuit things. It's why I was such a good investigator."

Good was understatement. Best of breed was no more than the truth. While it lasted.

"Did you intuit that your gentleman friend is delayed?" I asked.

"Ah, it was you who had me paged."

I nodded.

Her glance was quizzical, adding me this way and that for a moment, but all she said was, "Well, that's good. It means we can have that drink now." And led the way toward the hotel bar.

It was still short of noon and the drinks turned out to be coffee. Except for the two of us, the bar was deserted. Sam Bredloe, our town's octogenarian mayor and long-time owner of the Black Rock Inn, served us himself since there's almost nothing pleases him more than being around a pretty woman. He slipped me a wink to show how impressed he was. She nicked it off and double-winked back, delighting him.

"He owns the hotel," I informed her when we were alone again. "On his deathbed he plans to will it to you."

"I'll take it," she said. She folded her arms across her pleasant chest and shook her head. "Roy Loomis, what on earth are you doing in a place like this?"

"You mean in a place this far from the Beltway?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"I live here," I said. "It's my hometown. I must have told you that half a dozen times. You forgot?"

Gently, she thumped her head with a knuckle and said, "Stu-

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pid, stupido. Black Rock, I knew it sounded familiar. But I thought it was because of that old Spencer Tracy movie. Hell, Roy, I must be winding down."

"No sign of it in the legs."

She looked where I was looking but did nothing about adjusting her skirt. "And now of course you're going to tell me LaMar Hunnicut is a dear friend of yours," she said.

"He's my first cousin. His mother and mine were sisters."

"Oh God. Figures. What else? I sense there's a what-else."

"The what-else is I'm the newly elected sheriff of Black Rock County, North Carolina."

At that she doubled over in silent laughter, and maybe this is a pretty good time to go back two days to give you an inkling of why that was so funny. Well, not as ha-ha funny as she was pretending, but life-sure-is-a-twisty-affair kind of funny.

Two days. That might make it elevenish, Tuesday. I'm sitting in my office, trying to explain to Harvey Bredloe, one of my three deps, some of the intricacies of crowd control. Harvey is ambitious, conscientious, and a dunderhead, in addition to being our mayor's only nephew. The previous night he'd tried, singlehanded, to break up a fight at a high-school basketball game, as the result of which an eye had been blacked, his nose bloodied, and his tan-and-white hijacked. Who says the big city has all the wide boys? The car had been found three hours ago, four flats, okay otherwise, spotted for us by a gleeful anonymous phone caller.

"Harvey," I said, "how many times do I have to tell you? You don't wade in where there are fifty of them and one of you."

"Snotnose kids."

"What you do is call for help. It's why God made radios."

"Snot—"

"If you say that again, I swear I'll suspend you."

He didn't, or I might have. He knit his brows truculently but kept silent. A minute later he left. The minute after that he stuck his head back in. "LaMar called while you was over to County Hall. Says for you to phone. Says it's important."

"When were you going to tell me? Sometime before we both retired?"

"Hell," he said, "it's just LaMar."

I sighed, dismissed him, and lifted the phone to call "Just LaMar," whose fate it is to be a prophet without honor here in

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Black Rock, despite the fact that he's well on his way to becoming its richest citizen.

LaMar owns the *Black Rock Gazette,* the weekly cash cow that's made his family comfortable upwards of seventy-five years. He also owns a thriving minor league baseball team, a famous fast-food franchise, the Black Rock National Bank and its eleven branches, plus sizeable chunks of land, developed and un, in and around the county—all this due to that first-class financial brain of his, which very few give him credit for. He's funny-looking, you see. Short and funny-looking, a class of humans likely to be underestimated unless named Perot or Napoleon.

So LaMar's good with money. That's one significant thing about him. Another, as you're about to learn, is how dumb he is with women.

"Lunch," he said. "Minnie O's. Twelve-fifteen." And hung up. He has this way of ordering me around, which he claims he's entitled to, being six months the older. I let him do it because it would make him feel bad if I didn't.

Minnie O's is a barn of a place some ten miles outside of town, outside of Galway, that is, Black Rock's county seat. Black Rockians usually go there when they have a little more than lunch on their minds. Weddings, retirement parties, assignations. Give Minnie enough planning time, and she can set up just about anything for you. Also the food's pretty good.

I found LaMar hunched over a brew. He saw me, bounced off his perch, and skedaddled over to a table in a corner. LaMar doesn't like the contrast we make when we step off side by side. I've worked on a Groucho Marx shuffle-slouch, but there's just not much you can do to disguise five-four against six-one.

We ordered drinks and Minnie O's garlicky, peppery, succulent fishcakes, that day's special, which we gobbled down easy on the chitchat. Right after that, though, LaMar said, "I'm in love."

"Again?"

"You don't believe me, I can tell." Unfriendly-like.

"Sure I believe you. I always believe you. That makes forty-seven times I've believed you. Not counting the dozen or so practice runs while we were up at the University. Hey, LaMar, I regard your being in love as serious business, since it so often leads to the output of serious money."

"I don't give a damn about the money. Money isn't everything. Money is . . . You always make such a big deal about the money."

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"I do?"

"Money, money, goddam money." Clearly the concept was loathesome to him.

"All right, who's the lucky lady?"

"I doubt if I'm about to tell you."

I lifted my glass of ale, quaffed deeply, and savored noisily.

"Her name's Melissa Burgoyne, and I met her at the last meeting of the A. P. Hill Admirers. Remember? Couple of months ago? I went over to Asheville for it?"

A. P. Hill, in case you're not a War Between the States buff, was a Confederate general some think of as unsung. LaMar is among them. He also thinks we're related to him through a collateral branch of the family. A distant and boring collateral branch, I tell him, whenever he tries to prove same to me. Which is often. LaMar's a closet snob. He's also a dyed-in-the-wool romantic, of course, explaining his world-class susceptibility.

"What was a long-legged, well-built, blue-eyed blonde doing among the Admirers?" I asked. "Don't tell me she's one of the great-great-greats?"

"Well, she sure as hell is."

"Granddaughter?"

"Niece." He glared at me. "How did you know she was . . . what you said?"

"They always are. Now tell me what she wants from you."

"Nothing. Not a damn thing."

I quaffed again and waited.

"God, how I hate a cynic. Cynics think they're so damn superior. They think the rest of us are nothing but fools and/or suckers."

"We're all fools about something," I said mildly.

"Three times I offered to back her. And three times she refused me. *Three* times. Finally, I had to get angry, really angry, before she accepted my offer. But of course you in your infinite goddam wisdom know that was all an act."

"Back her for what?"

"She wants to write a book. It'll be about Second Manassas, but totally from General Hill's point of view. It'll be an important book. Roy, now you know good and well I always thought there was an untold story there. She needs the money for some traveling, you know, for research expenses, and to keep body and soul together while she's working."

"How much?"

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For a moment he considered not answering, but he knew I'd keep him there all day until he did, so: "Ten thousand."

I whistled.

"Damn it, we're talking six months here, and an amount I can easily afford. And anyway, how many times do I have to tell you money's not the issue."

"What is?" I asked, as if I didn't know.

"The issue is I love her. And she loves me. She's not like . . ." He stumbled around for a name, so I slipped him four. This caused his ears to redden, but the fact is I could have as easily supplied a dozen.

"What she is, dammit, is an angel. And I'd be willing to give her much more than ten grand if she'd accept it."

"Something you made vividly clear to her, I bet."

"Oh shut up."

"How come I haven't heard about this angel before?"

"Guess."

"How many times have you and this angel actually been within kissing distance?"

"I don't keep a diary."

"Five, ten times? More? Less?"

"None of your business."

I quaffed and waited.

"Twice, but what's that supposed to mean? If it's love, it's love, period, the end. And anyway, it *is* none of your business. It's my money, my life, my business. And if I want to fall in love with Lucrezia Borgia, I'll damn well do it. And if I want to throw ten grand off a bridge, I'll damn well do that, too." He paused, took a deep breath. "Roy, Roy, just once forget you're a cop. Just be happy for me."

I drained my glass and stood up. "Nice speech," I said. "Before I go, I wouldn't mind hearing it once more so I can get it down pat and play it back word perfect when it seems appropriate. When might that be? The next time you give me hell for not being cousinly, for not watching over you the way you'd allegedly watch over me if the situation were reversed. All right now, LaMar, do I disappear, or do you stop horsing around and give me the details you got me down here to give me?"

He sighed, smiled foolishly, and then spent the next thirty minutes or so setting wings and halo firmly in place. During this hymn of praise, I learned that Melissa Burgoyne was due in town

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the following evening, and that she'd be staying at the Black Rock Inn.

"She's driving down. She lives in D.C. But she'll be in Durham for some kind of regional conference of historians, so it's an easy—"

"Historian? That's what she is?"

"Dammit, Roy, I *told* you that, but when you don't want to listen—"

"You told me she needed all this money to keep body and soul together while working on her book. Don't historians usually get their meal tickets punched at universities?"

"She's sort of an amateur historian. Now that's enough. No more of this rootin' around for the sake of . . . I don't know what. You're going to meet her, and when you do you'll fall in love with her, I swear you will." He stopped and looked down at the tablecloth for a long moment, as if fascinated by the remarkable way in which red and white squares can form a checkerboard. He lifted his glance. "Roy, promise you'll fall in love with her."

But I made him no promises.

Back to the lady historian bent double with me watching her, knowing that by now she was splitting time between hilarity and the planning of her next move.

Let's leave her to it a bit longer. Speaking of history, here's some I shared with her when she was Marge Hinchley.

Which is who she was during that period when we were partnered agents operating out of the FBI office in D.C. But who she might very well have stopped being right after the house spooks busted her for taking significant contributions from a couple of connected gentlemen.

I only heard from her once subsequent to that. It was when she called to tell me she was leaving town. She'd been able to cut a deal. No jail time. Which is what you can do, often as not, if you know where enough bodies are buried. She was heading for temporary exile. Parts unknown, she said. I didn't believe that. I didn't believe it because the thing about Margie is she *always* knew where she was going.

"I'll be okay," she'd informed me though I hadn't asked.

I kept silent.

"Ah, you're angry with me. Why? Because I didn't tell you I was taking dirty money? What would you have done if I had?"

"I don't know."

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"I do. You'd have turned me in and then hated yourself. So that's what I saved you. You ought to thank me."

"Thanks," I said now, ten years later. She stopped laughing, undoubling herself to glance at me curiously.

"For what?"

"Forget it. Something left over from a used conversation."

She smiled. "I almost think I know what you mean." She then looked at her watch. "LaMar said he'd be here at noon. It's ten past now. What does delayed mean? Is he coming at all?"

"In a while."

"Did you manage to convince him?"

"Of what?"

"That I'm . . . shall we say . . . an illusion?"

I kept silent.

Her eyes lighted. "That means no, doesn't it?"

"It means I didn't try," I said. "It means you're going to do it for me."

"Am I? How?"

"By destroying his check, by ripping it into shreds, and not being here when he arrives. He'll get the message."

"And suppose I say go chase yourself."

"Then I'll introduce you to my slammer, to a back room in my slammer, where I'll keep a tape going during the interrogation I conduct for LaMar's benefit."

She stared at me. I stared back. "That sounds unpleasant," she said.

"It will be."

"Well, then, I suppose I'd best go upstairs and get it, the check, I mean."

"Good idea."

She studied me for a long moment.

"What?"

"I was remembering something. I was remembering . . ." She leaned very close and whispered the rest of what she'd been remembering. I felt the softness of a breast and the insidious pull of a familiar perfume. She straightened, studied me some more, and said, "I've seen the day that would have worked for me."

"I know."

She shook her head sadly. "Roy Albert Loomis, I do believe you think you're going to live forever."

I said nothing.

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She left.

Ten minutes later she was back. She handed me an envelope. "In the required shreds," she said. "One day, of course, you'll kick yourself. Oh yes, while imagining in colorful detail the times we could have had together."

She kissed me twice, once briefly and once lingeringly, as if in memento mori. She reached up and patted my cheek. "I'll be off now if it's all right with you," she said, then grinned. "Have to find someone who needs a good book written."

I watched the little bit of extra sashay she put into her exit.

Not too long after that LaMar turned up. He took one look at me and knew events were about to swerve in an unexpected direction. "What the hell have you done?" he demanded.

I told him. When I got to the part about the house-spook bust his shoulders slumped. I finished my story, and he covered his face with his hands.

"I thought she was so . . . so . . ."

I opened the envelope and started cobbling the shreds together. Soon enough it became clear that this was not a check drawn on the Black Rock First National, which it would have been if LaMar had written it. I kicked his foot until he was willing to look.

Looking made him angry. Anger brought recovery. "That scheming little . . . She pulled a switch." His eyes widened. "How long since she took off?"

"About an hour."

"Oh God, I left word at the bank that they should P.O.D. her—pay on demand. I didn't want her wasting a nanosecond of her precious time. Isn't that terrific? An hour? Oh God, she's got my hard-earned money, and is long, long gone with it by now." He repeated his turtle act. "She's made fools of us, Roy."

I kept silent.

His hands came away, and he stared at me. "Of *us,* dammit. Not just me."

I kept silent.

"Don't give *me* that look."

"What look?"

"That tea and sympathy look. Like it was some other county sheriff she led down the garden path. You know what your trouble is, Roy? I'll tell you what your trouble is. You can't abide being outsmarted. God, it's worth almost everything to see you with egg on your face. Admit it, *Sheriff,* she snookered you, too."

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My beeper went off. "Back in a minute," I said and left to find a phone. "Okay," I said when I returned.

"Okay what?"

"Okay, what do you want done with her? That was Harvey Bredloe. He's tailing her car, which is about a mile short of Marshall's Creek, where I figure it'll run out of gas."

It took a moment to register.

"I left about a gallon in her tank," I said.

Shutting his eyes, he kept them that way for several of those nanoseconds. At length, I heard him sigh in the way a man will sometimes when all of his choices are of the cut-your-losses variety. "Just ride her away from here," he said small-voiced.

"You're sure?"

"Way away. Bring her in, and in thirty minutes the whole county'd know what an idiot I've been." But there was more on his mind, and I knew it. He made a few noises, mostly unintelligible. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Roy . . ."

"What?"

"Back in D.C., were you and she . . ." He couldn't get the word out.

"No," I lied.

His face brightened. After which he suddenly fired up.

"Now, you listen to me, Roy Loomis. It's okay to let her go if *you* want to, but she has my cash. And you're going to be in hellish hot water if you don't get every dime back."

Scurrying away without so much as a cousinly glance.

"Money, money, goddam money," I muttered to his empty chair. ●

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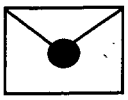

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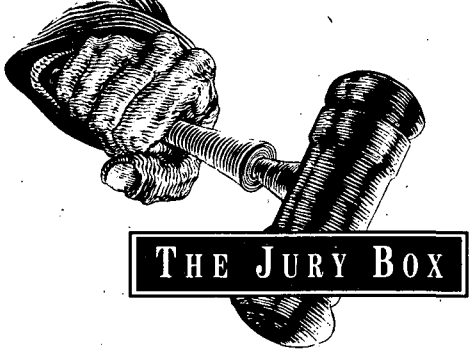

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

The purpose of this column is to cover the mystery field as widely and definitively as possible. That's why I often pass up a new book by an old favorite in order to discover an intriguing newer writer or one of established reputation not previously reviewed in this space. This month, however, I indulge myself: All of the books reviewed are by personal favorites, writers who are always reliable for an entertaining job and whose books I invariably reach for with eagerness.

**** Robert Irvine: *Pillar of Fire,* St. Martin's, $21.95. The father-and-son detecting team of Martin and Moroni Traveler is employed by a Mormon church apostle to find his daughter, who in search of a miracle healing for a son afflicted with Hodgkin's disease has gone to Fire Creek, a small Utah town plagued by the effects of bomb-testing fallout and controlled by a polygamist cult. The eighth in this series is one of the best. Reviewing it in the *Los Angeles Times,* Dick Adler in a single sentence compared the author to Tony Hillerman, Umberto Eco, and Ross Macdonald. An exaggeration? Read it and see.

**** Susan Dunlap: *Sudden Exposure,* Delacorte, $20.95. Berkeley cop Jill Smith doesn't let a transfer from detective back to uniformed patrol officer cramp her style in a case involving a galloping nudist, a feminist Olympic diver who runs a health club called the Girls' Team, and various shadows from the university town's radical political tradition. Why do I admire Dunlap's work so much? For her classical plots maybe, or her characters or style. But mostly because she nails Berkeley, California, as well as any mystery writer has nailed any city from

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Poe to Chandler to Grafton and beyond.

**** Bill Pronzini: *Blue Lonesome,* Walker, $21.95. An author who has demonstrated an ability to write any kind of crime, mystery, or suspense novel here delivers a tale of loneliness and obsession to a jazz beat that insistently recalls the work of Cornell Woolrich. CPA Jim Messenger saw the terribly unhappy and lonely woman numerous times at San Francisco's Harmony Cafe and even spoke to her once, unsatisfactorily. When she commits suicide and is designated a Jane Doe by the police, Messenger is determined to find out who she was and where she came from, an ex-library book his only clue. To say more about this complex and satisfying novel would be a disservice. This may not be Pronzini's very best — novels like *The Running of Beasts* (1976, with Barry N. Malzberg) and *Shackles* (1988) come to mind — but it probably belongs in his top half-dozen.

*** Parnell Hall: *Trial,* Mysterious, $21.95. When slip-and-fall lawyer Richard Rosenberg takes on a rare criminal case (and imagines himself Perry Mason), New York private eye Stanley Hastings serves in the Paul Drake role as his investigator, checking out the alibi of accused wife-murderer Anson Carbinder. Given the concentration on the minute details of the defendant's card-game alibi, an even better one-word title might have been *Poker.* Whatever the title, Hall develops his usual complex plot and dialogue-driven narrative, highly recommended to fans of writers like Gregory Mcdonald, Ed McBain, and (of course) Erle Stanley Gardner.

*** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *Dancing in the Dark,* Mysterious, $19.95. The celebrity client in the latest novel about forties Hollywood private eye Toby Peters is none other that Fred Astaire, who wants to escape the responsibility of teaching a mob figure's lady friend to dance. As usual, both the real-life and purely fictional characters are well realized, and the funny lines and comic situations are buttressed by a sound whodunit plot. Still, it's hard for even as meticulous a writer as Kaminsky to keep out the anachronisms: "good-news-bad-news," "elevator from hell," and "Whatever" (as the conversational filler) don't seem to belong to the World War II era. (A typically strong entry in an even better Kaminsky series is the 1995 novel *Hard Currency* [Ivy, $5.99], in which Russian sleuth Porfiry Rostnikov pays an official visit to Cuba while Moscow colleague Emil Karpo hunts a serial killer back home.)

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*** Anne Perry: *Cain His Brother,* Fawcett Columbine, $22.95. The sixth book in Perry's mid-19th-century series about amnesiac London detective William Monk and Crimean War nurse Hester Latterly concerns the disappearance and apparent murder of respected businessman Angus Stonefield, twin brother of pernicious criminal Caleb Stone. In style, humor, and evocation of character and background, this is up to the author's high standard; on the downside, the solution is a bit hard to swallow though (paradoxically) few canny mystery readers will fail to foresee at least a part of it. (New in paperback is the previous novel in the series, a better one, 1994's *The Sins of the Wolf* [Ivy, $6.99], in which Hester is accused of murder in a Scottish courtroom and Florence Nightingale testifies on her behalf.)

*** William L. DeAndrea: *Written in Fire,* Walker, $19.95. An author who always delivers a puzzle plot of Golden Age meticulousness has fun with the conventions of another genre, the western, in this first novel about disabled-lawman-turned-frontier-Wyoming-journalist Lobo Blacke, narrated by his dime-novelist biographer Quinn Booker. A Queenian dying message is delivered by one victim in a possibly unique manner, but I think a number of readers will tumble to its meaning faster than Blacke does.

*** Harry Kemelman: *That Day the Rabbi Left Town,* Fawcett Columbine, $22. Rabbi David Small, who resigned from Barnard's Crossing Temple in his previous appearance, takes a job as Professor of Judaic Studies at Boston's Windemere College while the Temple breaks in a new rabbi who, like his predecessor, begins his tenure as a murder suspect. This eleventh is not among the best in the series, but it does have the strengths (neat puzzle, theological and political insights, and interesting murderer) you expect of the 87-year-old author, whose classic "The Nine-Mile Walk" appeared in this magazine's April 1947 issue. (How about another Rabbi novel in 1997, to mark the author's fiftieth anniversary as mystery writer?)

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Art by Todd Lockwood

THE LAST, BEST CHANCE

by Suzanne Jones

He hadn't looked like the last, best chance to Duffy in the beginning. When he knocked her out of the path of the oncoming car, he had seemed less heroic than interfering. She might have saved herself, and with less damage. She found herself bruised against the opposite curb, her knee scraped and bleeding. Her lips felt numb. Her whole body felt numb.

"That guy never even stopped! It's like he tried to run her down!" An indignant voice. Then other disembodied, indignant voices. Concerned voices. Hands pulling her to a sitting position, then upright. Where she swayed, looking down stupidly at her torn stockings and bloody knee.

"Is she all right? Does she need a doctor?"

"No, she's just drunk." Another voice. *His* voice, flat and unemotional. Harsh. She twisted her head around to look at him and found that she had torn the earring from her ear and was

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bleeding from there as well.

"I'll see that she gets home," he said.

She could not now remember if he had said anything else to her then. He had half-dragged, half-supported her when she stumbled the remaining distance to the parking lot at Alfalfa's. When they reached her car, he opened her purse and extracted her keys and wallet — she supposed to find out where she lived. Duffy hadn't much noticed or cared what he did. She supposed this not-caring was part of the incremental progress of the pilgrim on the road to not-being — which she knew was an achievable goal. God knows, if Jeff could attain it, in time anyone could.

The man drove her home in the "previously owned" BMW Gregory had bought her last year. She tried to concentrate on the myriad of lights on the dash, but the tears kept rolling down her cheeks. The ergometric arrangement of the dash had particularly impressed Gregory's son: Jeffrey in the cold, cold ground.

Poor Jeff. Gregory's son never had been much good at anything, yet he had managed his end with an efficiency she would not have expected. It made her think that it must have been an accident. They say most suicides are. And Jeff was said to have had an astonished look on his swollen face, as if his success had taken him by surprise, as though the consequence of stepping off a chair with his neck in a noose should have surprised anyone.

It was now the week before Labor Day, and in a few weeks the aspen would begin to turn gold in the high country, and the grass would stiffen and brown on Jeff's grave. The funeral hadn't been

Boulder, Colorado, the setting for Suzanne Jones's new story, and her own home, has become an important spot on the mystery map. Not only does the college town, with its beautiful setting in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, boast one of the best mystery bookstores in the country, last summer it hosted a conference of historical mystery writers, many attending from overseas. The conference is to become a yearly event, an opportunity for many mystery fans and writers to combine a vacation in the Rockies with an opportunity to discuss crime fiction. †

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that long ago. A month? Two months? The only thing she could remember from it was Jeff's friend Matthew coming up to her at the grave site and pushing his owlish face into hers and telling her that he wished her as dead as Jeff.

Which was unfair of him. He hadn't known the half of it. Besides, she had tried to find a little sorrow within herself for Jeff, but by the time he had dangled and danced in the air of the attic of her sister's large old house on Mapleton, there wasn't any. All gone. No sorrow or affection tucked away in any corner of her soul. Perhaps Matthew was right, and her indifference was what had led him up to the attic, but she doubted it. Jeff had better reasons than Duffy to do himself in.

Though she might have been a contributing factor. But then, wasn't everything? Carcinogens. The rape of the environment. Cruelty to animals. Haiti, or the little war of the month.

She felt little guilt concerning Jeff's end in the attic. He had effectively removed himself from the people she cared about on that twisting road down the Big Thompson Canyon. She felt a surge of anger at the memory, which she supposed should remind her that she was not as far along as she might be on the true path to not-caring, pilgrim that she was, if she could still feel that much anger.

She wondered if it had been Matthew who had been behind the wheel of the car which had almost run her down. Or another one of Jeff's friends. She had seen only a blurred shape bearing down on her, but then her eyes had been full of angry tears. No one had gotten the license number of the car. But she doubted it was Matthew. It was probably just someone who hadn't seen her crossing blindly in the middle of the block until too late, someone who had made a mistake and didn't want to stop to live with the consequences. Duffy could sympathize with that position.

Her rescuer came into the elevator with her and up to the apartment Gregory had leased for her near Boulder's mall. He unlocked the door, pushed her into the bathroom, into the shower still fully clothed, turned on the water, and left her there.

The drug and alcohol induced ennui dissipated in the shock of the cold water, leaving her exhausted, and her body sore and stiff. She shed her sodden clothes and dabbed some antiseptic on her knee and ear. She wrapped a towel about her wet blond hair and put on a robe. When she came into the living room, she had almost forgotten about him. She hadn't expected to find him still there.

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He was a tall, lean man with broad shoulders and angry eyes. He was looking closely at the wall of photographs: Duffy in a sailplane. Duffy in a kayak. On the tennis court. On Hallet's third buttress. On Shasta on crampons. And et cetera. Fragments of her life. Most of the high points.

"Almost getting run over — almost getting yourself killed wouldn't rattle you much, would it?" He waved a hand at the photographs. "It's what you do for fun."

"That's right," she said. "I'm just plucky as anything."

He took hold of her robe at the throat and pushed her against the wall of photographs. The frames dug painfully into her back.

"If you're not afraid to die, then what *are* you afraid of?"

His face was very close to hers. The irises of his eyes were caramel colored with red flecks in them. His grip on her was painfully tight. She had to force herself not to look away.

"Are you afraid of mutilation?" He moved his hand to her face. "You're a good-looking girl. Afraid of being slashed?" He drew a finger lightly across her cheek. "Of being blinded?" He tapped the corner of her eye. She made herself gaze steadily at him.

A weirdo. A freak. The world was full of them. Rescued by a pervert. Just her luck.

"No," he said, releasing her abruptly and turning away. "It's not so much that you're *not* afraid of death, is it? It's more that life doesn't matter that much to you. So you could always find another car to step in front of. Mutilation would just be a painful stop on the way to oblivion."

"I'd just as soon avoid it, thanks."

She relaxed a little. He was talking too much to be a real threat. They say real threats don't talk—they just do.

She rubbed her throat and pulled the robe closer about her. Her head ached. Too much wine, too many pills. She wanted to tell him to go, but was cautious. The violence in him seemed very close to the surface.

"Who pays for this place?" he asked. "And all of those?" He indicated the pile of credit cards he had emptied from her wallet onto the neat and orderly surface of her desk.

He looked at her, but she said nothing.

"You're a student at the university, and these digs are too pricey for a student. Besides, you're kind of old for a student, aren't you? Pushing thirty," he said, picking up her student ID.

"Slow learner," she said then, cautiously. There was something about him that was disturbing, dangerous. On the edge. Maybe

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she was wrong. Maybe he was a doer. "So you should let me get back to my books. I've got three cantos of the *Faerie Queene* that I should be galloping through as we speak. Anyway, you've done your good deed for the week. You can go about your business full of self-congratulations."

She opened the door for him.

He didn't move. "What if no one is there to push you out of danger the next time you cross a street?"

She fingered her torn ear. "I'll have to fall back on using the crosswalk and going with the light. Not to worry. I'll get by."

"The Chinese say that if you save a life, you become responsible for it."

She wondered whether anyone would come if she screamed into the hall. Probably not. The inhabitants of the building carefully kept themselves remote from one another. A respect for privacy was as much a requirement for living at that fashionable address as the hefty deposit.

"I'm not Chinese, and neither are you," she said evenly. "Consider yourself absolved of any responsibility. Thanks for everything."

He nodded. "And have a nice day." He tossed her keys on the desk, took one last look about the room, and left.

She put the chain on the door and clicked the deadbolt into place. Rescuer or no, she knew he had wanted to see if he could frighten her. Consider it done.

He hadn't looked like the last, best chance then.

Duffy had gone through the next few days of classes numbly. Despite the ugliness of the quarrel with Gregory which had propelled her in front of that car, she expected to hear from him. As usual. She had wanted the telephone to ring. Not wanted it to ring. Wanted it to ring. For almost a week.

Then when it did ring, the man's voice wasn't Gregory's.

"This is Richard Anderson." There was a pause while she tried to place the voice. It sounded familiar.

"I'm the guy who isn't Chinese. The one who kept you from becoming roadkill. Remember me?"

Remember those angry eyes inches from her own, wanting—no, demanding—to know what she was afraid of?

"Yes, I remember you."

"Dodged any speeding cars lately?"

"Lately I haven't had to."

"I noticed from one of the hero shots on your wall that you're a

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tennis player, and I've got tickets to the Volvo tournament. They're playing the first few rounds at the Event Center this weekend. Do you want to go?"

Was it the challenge in his voice that made her accept? Or that Gregory hadn't called? She didn't know. Though she was a little afraid of Richard Anderson, at that particular moment he hadn't seemed nearly as dangerous to her as Gregory. And she had wanted to see the tennis.

"No good deed should go unpunished," she told him. Of course she would go.

Out of deference to Gregory (who by the weekend had brought her flowers and stayed over), but mostly because she had little interest in Richard Anderson, she didn't dress with any particular care and wore no makeup and her heavy glasses instead of contacts. She supposed she looked like the English graduate student that she was. Richard Anderson didn't comment on her appearance.

He was knowledgeable about tennis, and she enjoyed the event more than she would have had she stayed home and watched it on television. Which was the reason she agreed to see him again. He had tickets to one of the Artist Series concerts at Macky, the auditorium on campus. Some Japanese violinist. Who was marvelous. This time Duffy dressed for the occasion.

They went for coffee afterwards, went for lunch the next day. He asked many questions of her, but she learned little about him. He had been a software designer but was on some sort of disability leave from his company for a bad back. He had been married once but was not married now. He seemed to have plenty of time, money, and no particular girlfriend.

The persistency with which he pursued certain subjects irritated her. He seemed fascinated by her need to put herself at risk. And he kept asking her—in different ways—who the man was in her life. A girl like her always had someone.

Though she was candid with him in most things (she used candor as a measure of her indifference), she refused to answer those questions. Besides, the reason she put herself at risk was so personal and so mundane it embarrassed her: She was afraid to be afraid. The only thing worse than fear was giving in to it. And she refused to tell him about Gregory. Gregory was nobody's business but her own.

Sometimes she found Richard staring at her in a way which made her uneasy. She had expected him to make some sort of pass

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at her on any one of the times she had gone out with him, and she had been prepared for that, but he had not. That puzzled her a little more each time she saw him, and finally offended her vanity.

After a discussion they had on Renaissance architecture and Northern Italy, he asked her to his apartment to partake of something he called his "ancestral spaghetti," which he alleged was a familial recipe from Italy, but from an area so far north it was almost Swiss.

His apartment was comfortably and expensively furnished, but modern and not particularly Italian or anything else. The furnishings were obviously rented. There was so little in it that was personal, the place had a temporary feel.

The spaghetti sauce, he assured her, was ninety-percent bacon fat and butter, and not for anyone who had a concern for health or long life. Its excellence was reserved only for those fearless enough (or stupid enough) to consume that much fat at one sitting.

They drank white wine during the preparation—he chopped the bacon and onion and green peppers and mushrooms while she sat on a stool in the kitchen and watched. She accused him of the Tom Sawyer ploy: He was trying to make the activity of chopping all those vegetables look fascinating enough to emulate. But he could not tempt her. Chopping was cooking, and Duffy didn't cook.

With only one person doing the chopping—and many vegetables to be chopped—there was time for a considerable amount of white wine to be consumed before they sat down to eat. He opened a good bottle of Chianti Classico for the meal itself, and by the time they got to the after-dinner brandy, they were both a little drunk. Which may explain what happened next.

She heard him mutter that he should never have gone near her, should never have touched her. He hadn't intended this. And afterwards he looked so sad, she almost believed him. .

He said, "I'm sorry. I haven't been with a woman for some time."

"I have to go," she said, gathering up her clothes.

"Not yet," he said. This time his hands were not rough.

It was late by the time she got back to her apartment. There was a message from Gregory on her answering machine. He had wanted to meet her for a drink after work. Wherever she was, he hoped she was safe and warm and thinking of him. She erased the message and stood for a time in the dark, not thinking of anything at all.

The next day she went to class and the library. She had a paper

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for her Spenser seminar due the first week in October. When she came back to the apartment, she thought she would hear from Richard. She didn't.

Gregory had left her a message, affectionate and concerned, but Richard hadn't called. A week passed without her hearing from him. And then two.

His not calling her put her a little off balance. It was not what she expected. She tried to call him, and found that he had no answering machine. She was more puzzled than hurt and then annoyed with herself that she felt anything at all.

But it had shaken her confidence and left her uneasy. The world wasn't working quite the way it should.

She put it down to her state of mind when she thought that someone might be following her. She'd glimpse movement out of the corner of her eye, but would turn to find no familiar face among the students hurrying to their classes. Still, her life seemed to move as smoothly along its customary way as it ever had. She went to class. She saw Gregory when he was free. Had her wine when she was alone. Nothing had changed, apart from this uneasiness.

Her sister Mary called, wanting to know who she was bringing with her the next weekend to Grand Lake. Closing the summer house was a ritual in which Duffy had participated almost every year since their father died. Two weeks after Labor Day, when the aspen were brilliant against the dark green forests of pine and fur and spruce on the side of the mountain, the family — Mary and Gregory, their three daughters, and Gregory's mother — went to Grand Lake to close the house for the summer. This would be their first year without Jeff, Mary had said sadly. She had been fond of Gregory's son by his first marriage, that is, as fond as Mary was of anyone. It was something which Duffy had admired for years: Mary's reserve, her incredible poise, the way she glided through her life, kind, unruffled, and serene, leaving the worries of the world to work themselves out as best they might.

The past couple of years Duffy had taken one of Jeff's friends with her to the lake. They were pleasant, clean-cut, well-behaved boys who had little interest in her. Mary expected Duffy to take someone, so she might as well take one of Jeff's friends. It was someone to sail and fish with and someone to help them pull the boats out of the water and help make the house ready for winter.

Now she knew she should call someone to go to the lake with her, but not one of Jeff's friends. She seemed to have become the

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center of their anger at his loss. Like Matthew. Their resentment made her impatient. But she should take someone.

The day after Mary's call was a raw, windy day, a day which was more typical of November than the last of September. Duffy had been on her way to the library on campus amid swirls of leaves when someone caught her arm. As she tried to pull away, he forced her to look at him.

"Remember me?" he asked.

"Let's see now. I'm older, and my recall isn't what it once was. 'Richard,' isn't it?" She freed her arm. "Long time no see, Richard. Whatever have you been doing with yourself? You look awful."

He did look awful. His eyes were bloodshot, he needed a shave.

"I've been out of town," he said.

"'Out of town,' he said, as if it excused anything, as if it were a reason in and of itself," she said. "It's bad manners, Richard, after plying a girl with Chianti and cholesterol and boffing her brains out, not even to call to see if she got home. It's ungentlemanly. Worse, it's bad luck."

"Let's get some coffee," he said.

She hadn't intended to go with him, but the intensity of her feeling had surprised her. She had wanted to cause him pain. And she wasn't through wanting to.

But by the time they had found a table in the crowded student union, and he had gone to get their coffee, her anger had dissipated. She only felt a little tired and wondered what she was doing there when she ought to be studying. Worse, by the time he had made his way back to the table, she had begun to feel sorrier for him than for herself. It was hardly his fault he wasn't Gregory. Or that she had chosen to romanticize an evening of frenzied, drunken couplings, and he had not. Now he seemed to be a scapegoat to which she had been trying to tie her several sins. Nice try at being seduced and abandoned, Duffy. Quit looking for men on white horses to take you away from all this. If you don't like your life, get yourself out.

"I was afraid you might not still be here," he said, as he set the mug in front of her.

She hadn't said anything, but found she wasn't expecting him to say anything either. And he hadn't. He hadn't explained or apologized. He didn't elaborate on the "trip out of town." He seemed as remote as any stranger. Which, she reminded herself, he pretty much was.

He asked her about her classes, her instructors. Later she

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wouldn't be able to recall much of the conversation.

As they parted, she said carelessly, "Call me." But realized as she hurried in the direction of the library, that she had no real expectation that he would do so. Nor did she care.

But he did call her, and she asked him to go with her to Grand Lake for the weekend—to help close the summer house. After she hung up, she felt she had done a most unwise thing and was uneasier than ever.

The drive over did little to relieve that feeling, though the scenery through Estes Park and over Trail Ridge was as spectacular as ever and usually had a calming effect on her. The mountains didn't care, they just were. Always the same and ever different.

The aspen had been showy that fall, but wind had created patches of gray, leafless trees which lay against the dark green of the mountains like clouds of smoke.

He had said little on the way up Trail Ridge, that high road which would shortly close for the year with the first major snow. They were on the way down the other side toward Grand Lake when he said, "What do you dream of when you dream?"

The intimacy of the question disconcerted her. Their conversation had been carefully impersonal since he had stopped her on campus.

"You mean as in 'perchance to' or as in 'aspiration'?"

"Either. Both."

She shrugged. "Of being free, I guess. Isn't that what everyone dreams of?"

"Aren't you free now?"

"Almost no one is. Everyone has obligations, if only to himself. Oneself," she corrected herself irritably.

He nodded.

"What do *you* dream of?" she asked.

"I don't dream."

"Everyone dreams. At least when they sleep. You just don't remember—" she glanced sideways at him, but his face was smooth and as untroubled as she had ever seen it as he stared at the high valley before them.

"Duffy, thank God you've come. Ruth and I are boring the hell out of each other. We're on our billionth game of gin."

"Speak for yourself, Mary. Work does not bore me. And winning this much money at these stakes is work. But

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what's an old woman to do for a little pin money?"

"So how much are you up now," Duffy said as she embraced her sister and the old woman who was dark, like a gypsy.

"One hundred twenty-three thousand and some change," Ruth said, consulting a scorepad.

Mary rolled her eyes. She was a beautiful woman, blond and tall and as thin as if she hadn't had three children.

"Richard, this is my sister Mary and her mother-in-law, Ruth Bellflower. Richard Anderson. Don't believe what either one of them says about the other."

Her duty done, Duffy went to find some wine as her sister helped Richard take their things upstairs.

"She cheats," Mary confided to Richard as they mounted the stairs.

Ruth craned her neck to follow their progress.

"Nice-looking boy," Ruth said as Duffy came back to her. "Better than those noodles you been bringing up here. When you gonna marry? You girls, you let your best chances pass you by. It's not healthy for a woman to live alone. I should know."

"Don't overdo it, Ruth. Want to scare him off? Anyway, you should be ashamed of yourself. Mary is a lousy card player. You shouldn't have to cheat to beat her."

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear. Anyway, I only cheat to add a little interest. We spend so much time with each other, it makes us tired. My son is always dragging off my little ones to be on the lake with him. They could be a comfort to their grandmother—"

"—if only they'd stay home and learn to tat."

"What's wrong with learning a few skills? The problem with you girls is you got too much learning. Thinking too much will make anyone choleric."

"Choleric? God, Ruth. I'm going down to the boathouse."

Gregory was bringing the old inboard alongside the dock as Duffy reached it. The girls, ages four, seven, and eight, and blond as their mother, were as happy to see her as ever, scrambling out of the boat and banging into each other to hug her as she held her wine up out of harm's way. They wanted to know all about the man Duffy had brought with her. When she told them Richard had saved her from being flattened by a car, they tore away to the house to see a real live hero.

Gregory watched them scurrying up the hill.

"I thought you said you could have saved yourself."

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"Having a hero makes for a better story."

"He's not one of Jeff's friends?"

"No. I'm not very popular with Jeff's friends at the moment. They've nominated me for prime mover in Jeff's trip to the attic."

She watched his face darken.

"None of the boys has said anything to me," he said. "Why should they think you had anything to do with Jeff's death?"

Duffy hesitated, looking at the wine in her hand. It was the color of blood. She had not betrayed Jeff before his death, and Gregory had seemed in too much pain at the funeral to add more. She wondered why she was ready to tell him now. Maybe because she was tired of Jeff and his friends and their ignorance.

She drew him into the shade of the boathouse and out of view of the house above.

"Jeff and I were in an accident in July."

He looked at her questioningly.

"Do you remember the day I gave Jeff a ride back to Boulder? I had come up during the week for one of the kids' birthdays—Marianne's."

He leaned close to her and brushed her hair back from her face. "It was the last time Jeff was at the lake," he said. "This accident, it happened on your way back to Boulder?"

She nodded. "I let Jeff drive the BMW. He took the wrong road out of Estes, the road along the Big Thompson instead of back through Lyons. But it was such a lovely day, we didn't mind and didn't turn around. It's not that much farther. We were driving fast on a good road on a sunny day, and there was almost no traffic."

She offered him some wine, but he shook his head.

"Jeff passed a car and pulled in too closely. Cut the guy off and pissed him off, I guess. I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention. Before I knew anything was wrong, the guy had pulled alongside and then swerved in front of us. Stupid play. Jeff didn't brake in time to avoid hitting the rear fender, and their car spun over the bank and into the river."

Gregory frowned. "He should have told me."

"He was afraid to. Jeff stopped on the shoulder—the BMW didn't have a scratch on it—and I ran back to where they had gone over. We could hear them yelling for help. Then he dragged me back to the car and took off. I finally got him calmed down enough to let me call the highway patrol from a gas station—"

"What was so wrong in that? What else could you have done?"

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"Oh, Gregory, we left the scene, and they were pinned in the car and were drowning! There wasn't time to call anyone. We should have stayed and at least tried to help. The woman died. I read about it in the paper. They were tourists from Illinois."

He didn't say anything for a long moment.

"What does this have to do with the way Jeff's friends are treating you? Why should they blame you for his death?"

"Because I couldn't bear to be around Jeff afterwards. They knew that Jeff had been like a brother to me, that we were close, and then I wouldn't see him. I wouldn't return his calls."

"Why didn't you tell me there was trouble between you and Jeff?"

She looked away from him across the lake. "Because I'd have had to tell you about the accident, and I was ashamed. Leaving those people was such a weak thing for us to have done."

"Us? 'A weak thing for us to have done'? And what did you do that *you* regret? You said you weren't driving. You didn't run anyone off the road. You didn't panic. What has our brave Duffy to reproach herself for?"

She wanted to say, "I let him make me a coward," but Gregory's tone made her cautious. "I didn't have to get back into the car, but I did."

"Ah," he nodded. "Instead of plunging into the water, and effecting a single-handed rescue, you mean."

Duffy was very still.

He paced to the dock and came back to her. "You didn't tell me about this before Jeff's death, when I might have helped him, nor afterwards, when we all needed to know a reason—some reason—why he might have taken his own life. Instead of imagining all sorts of things. So why tell me now?"

And why had she? Because she was tired of Jeff's friends trying to make her feel guilty? They weren't her friends, and she didn't feel guilty. Or because she couldn't bear the sight of Gregory just now, happy with his children. Content with his life.

"I don't know."

He slapped her. She hadn't seen it coming and was stunned.

"You think about it," he said, "and let me know."

He turned on his heel and went up the slope to the house.

She tried to catch her breath.

"Lovers' quarrel?"

She hadn't heard him come along the dock. He peered at her through thick glasses.

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"Matthew, what are you doing here?"

"Jeff found out you were sleeping with his daddy, didn't he? Isn't that what broke his heart?"

"Get out of here, you little creep," she said fiercely. "Stop spying on me."

He blinked at her. "You can't possibly know how much I want you dead. It's my dearest wish."

"Put it with a tooth under your pillow," she said and brushed past him. She didn't look back until she got to the steps of the porch. By then he had disappeared.

The girls had taken Richard for a walk, and Mary and Ruth had started supper. Gregory was alone on the porch, but she walked past him without looking in his direction. She poured herself another glass of wine. Through the glass between the living room and the porch she saw Gregory get up and go back down the slope to the boathouse.

She looked at him dispassionately, the dark curly hair, the broad shoulders and heavy neck, the waist that was already beginning to thicken. He was almost fifteen years older than she was, but none of that mattered. She knew he had only to look over his shoulder at her for her to follow. There didn't seem to be much she could do about that. But he didn't look back, and she sat on the porch, drinking her wine until she heard the racket the girls made coming into the house.

Dinner was as subdued an affair as eating with three lively young girls could make it. Duffy had yet to attain that wine-assisted moment when nothing mattered and was very aware of Richard's silence as the girls prattled on about the walk they had taken with him. Gregory did not look at her.

Duffy helped the girls clear the table and stayed in the kitchen, mostly to supervise, while the adults took their coffee on the porch. When the kitchen was about as clean as it was going to get, she started the girls on Monopoly and took her wine onto the patio nearest the road. She thought it prudent to stay out of Gregory's way for a while.

"He's the one, isn't he?" Richard had come up silently behind her.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The man in your life. Him. Gregory."

"I wish you'd let that alone. And let me alone."

"I couldn't be sure until I saw you together. There's a lot of heat between you, even though he seems pretty out of

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sorts at the moment. Did bringing me here upset him?"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"The old woman knows, even if she doesn't say. The wife chooses not to notice."

"And the kids? Have you decided whether they know or not, or do you plan to interrogate them on the subject?"

"You're with him a lot, aren't you? You travel with him. He's the one who pays for your apartment."

"Shut up. It's none of your business."

Shut up before one of the girls comes onto the patio, looking for us. Or before Gregory wonders where we are.

"I had to be sure. I had seen him going into your building. I thought he was the one."

Then she was aware she was alone. She sat for a while, finishing her wine. Then she went into the kitchen for another glass and heard Mary taking the children upstairs for their baths. Only Ruth sat alone on the porch, looking over the lake in the dimming light.

"There you are. Your young man asked my Gregory to show him the boats. He said he likes to sail. Used to sail on Lake Michigan, he said. He's a strange one, isn't he? Such a quiet boy. Broody. Choleric. He probably thinks too much."

Lake Michigan. Duffy had gone to Chicago to meet Gregory on one of his business trips in June, before the accident, and they had a room overlooking the lake. There had been sailboats on it, and it looked like a vast, gray, inland sea.

It might have been possible, Duffy thought, if one had a vision of a gray BMW with Boulder County plates seared into the brain — even if one couldn't remember all the numbers — to go to the license bureau in Boulder and look through all those BMW registrations. There couldn't be that many gray BMW's in Boulder County. A hundred? Two hundred? Then check out each owner until he found a blonde who looked like the woman in the canyon. If one were very patient and very dedicated. But how to find the man?

She had drunk too much wine to think clearly. She tried to remember Richard's helping her to her car after he had knocked her against the curb. She was fairly certain that he hadn't opened her purse until then. How had he known which car was hers? Had he been following her, waiting for her to lead him to the man? What had he just said to her? "I saw him going into your building."

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"Where you going? You're gonna kill yourself running around like that in the dark!"

The dark wasn't the danger. She wasn't afraid of the dark. She hurled herself down that familiar path to find what she was afraid of, to break herself against it, if she had to. She didn't think she could make him believe her, but she could stop him. She had to stop him.

He met her at the door of the boathouse, and she knew she was too late. His face was pale. He was sweating and breathing hard.

"He wasn't the one," she panted, seizing his shoulders. "It was Jeff." She shook him. "It was his son who was driving."

"You'd have said anything to save him, wouldn't you? Anything."

He put his hands about her throat. In the dying light, his eyes looked as black as obsidian. Her mind was detached. So this was what death looked like. But her body had not lost its will to live. She tore frantically at his wrists.

"But he's dead, as dead as she is."

She hammered at his face as she lost consciousness, black streaked with red and a roaring in her ears. Then she was aware of her cheek hard against the rough planking of the dock.

She got to her knees, gasping, trying to pull the air into her burning lungs.

"I thought I wanted you dead, but I couldn't let him kill you, and he wouldn't let go." It was Matthew. "I had to keep hitting him. Weird. Is he dead? Did I kill him?"

He stood above Richard's body, the bloody oar still in his hands.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't think so."

She got to her feet and stumbled against the boathouse, groping inside the door for a light. Gregory was floating facedown in one of the slips, rocking gently deeper and deeper into the water.

"Oh God," Matthew said. "I'll get someone. I'll get the police."

He ran up the slope to the house and disappeared in the dark.

Duffy sat on the dock beside Richard and waited. Her throat ached, and she couldn't swallow. She closed her eyes. She heard the familiar sounds of the lake: the slap of the waves and the creak of the dock. An owl. The sounds she had heard when she was a child, when all she had to do was come in before dark. When she was free.

After a time, she put out a hand to his battered head and stroked his hair. Tenderly. Like a lover. ●

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P.I. TO THE STARS

by David M. Pierce

I was thirsty.

I looked down.

The vista was particularly unbeautiful.

Said vista consisted of a portion of the booze-soaked bar, a sodden beer mat extolling the virtues of a newly launched alcohol-free New York state wine, one empty glass (mine), and one worldly fortune (also mine). That is, if you consider two dollars American folding money and a small pile of change dominated by a Canadian quarter with a moose on it a fortune, worldly or not.

I sighed. Thirstily. Time to go to work, big fella.

I casually checked out the stool on my right — nothing doing there, as it was occupied by Mad Molly, a well-known (in rummy circles), bad-tempered old crone who hadn't bought anyone but her pungent self a drink since V-E Day, and then it was by mistake.

I casually checked out the stool on my left. Oh oh — pinstriped mohair. And highly polished oxblood loafers with brass tassels. Drinking martinis, too, at five and a quarter a throw. All right.

I turned to the clotheshorse.

"Pardon me, sir," I said. You look like an intelligent and well-educated man. Perhaps you can recall who it was who said, 'If I

A Canadian by birth, David M. Pierce settled in Paris after brief periods in Los Angeles and London. Los Angeles figures prominently in his book-length fiction since it is home base for his series private eye Vic Daniel. At six feet seven inches tall, Daniel is a standout in the P.I. field, especially given his taste for loud Hawaiian shirts. Mr. Pierce is having a laugh at the genre in the following short story. For a look at his longer fiction see *As She Rides By* (St. Martin's). †

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had to choose between betraying my country and saving my best friend, I hope I would have the courage to betray my country.' "

The dude turned in my direction slightly, raised his eyebrows, thought it over, then offered, "Winston Churchill, perhaps?"

"You could well be right, sir," I said, nodding. "Strangely, I was once faced with almost the identical decision myself, only in my case it was between saving my best friend's life and losing my reputation, my livelihood, my home, and my woman."

The dude made a noise which I interpreted as modest encouragement.

"At the time," I said, toying with my (empty) glass in an unobtrusive fashion, "I was at the acme, the very summit of my profession, which was that of private investigation. Indeed, not only was I feted by the rich and famous, I was even known as P.I. to the stars." Here I produced my wallet, and from it, without letting him get a glimpse of the rest of its moth-eaten contents, withdrew a business card which I placed between us on a comparatively clean section of the bar.

After my name, which I will not bother you with at this time, it went on indeed to state that I was "P.I. to the Stars," which modest assertion was followed by a Beverly Hills address, then assorted phone numbers. While the dude glanced warily at it, I reminded myself to try and con the cut-rate Armenian printer down the street next to the cheapo liquor store into making me up some more cards, as I was running out. And maybe add a mobile phone number this time, too, and a fax; what the hell, time marches on, a guy's got to keep up with things.

The mohair suit shifted his weight restlessly. I continued hastily: "There have been some few of us in the profession," I said, "whose reputations were paramount. Our be-all and end-all. And the cornerstones of our reputations were based on trust, discretion, and valor to be sure, but mainly founded on a one-hundred-percent success rate. Yes, sir, you heard me correctly, one-oh-oh percent. Not one failure was ever countenanced in the glittering careers of such of my confreres as Mr. Holmes, Mr. Wolfe, or Mr. Bonaparte of Antipodean fame, to name but a few. Nor could I, in a town where one was only as good as one's last film, or in my case, case, accept even the hint of failure."

Here the dude went to take a sip of his martini, found his glass empty, then raised one digit in the general direction of the ever-watchful bartender "Fingers" Finnegan, so called because if he

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ever did try to add up numbers counting on both hands, the most he'd be able to total would be six. I cleared my throat, then looked politely away. Then I heard the fugitive from *Esquire* utter the magic words, "You drinking, friend?"

I turned back, checked my watch—five-buck Korean ticker taken in trade at Max's Pawnshop—then allowed that I might just have time for a quick one so as to let the rush-hour traffic thin out a bit. Finnegan came back with another martini for the gent and set me up with my regular shot of Seagrams 7, with a beer chase.

"Happy days," I toasted the guy, then that shot disappeared as smartly as a plate of homemade brownies at a pothead convention. He took a healthy slug of his own poison, and then, before his orbs wandered down the bar again to where they had been focused when I first addressed him, i.e., on a regular habitué whose blond beehive was so heavily sprayed that when she'd toppled backwards off her stool a couple of afternoons earlier it'd shattered into tiny pieces, I recaptured his attention by saying, "Solving the particular case that was the cause of my downfall was not the problem. No, the solution was simplicity itself, despite the fact that the only clue I had was a loss of appetite."

"You begin slightly to interest me, friend," the guy said. "Pray continue."

Pray continue—as if I had plans to do anything else, friend. Mayhap I was going to suddenly leap off my stool and take off like Carl Lewis because I'd remembered I'd left my casserole de coq au vin on the back burner. Anyway.

"It all happened at the Cat of the Year show," I said, "somewheres between a few short years and one long lifetime ago. The festivities took place at that there too-too chi-chi Beverly Hills flophouse where you can have your own private overpriced cabin if you want instead of an overpriced room or suite. My partner and I were there to keep one eye on the cat owners' jewelry, of which there was considerable, and the other on the prizes and other assorted silverware, of which there was also considerable. Which meant, fortuitously, that we had no eyes left over with which to watch the felines, of which there were considerable also in every imaginable revoltingly pampered shape and powdered form. Their names alone were so nauseating it made macho types like my best pard Bill and me think about immediately emigrating to some far-off catless elsewhere, like a dog pound on Mars, say.

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"Sir, let me say now that despite the generous fee involved, normally, given the depths of my feelings towards the whole furbag family, except maybe Elsa, I wouldn't go near a job like that. Also — me, with my standing in the business, doing hotel security, a job for pensioned-off flatfeet and over-the-hill Brinks drivers? Don't make me laugh; the stitches might come out. However, my presence had been commanded by an extremely heavyweight film magnate of my acquaintance, Hollywood's latest Cecil B., to whom one said no at great financial peril, and, so it was rumored, personal peril, and whose fifth and youngest wife just happened to own a leading contender for the highly coveted cat Oscar, a long-haired Burmese called Num Num Sri Lanka Segunda, as I recall.

"Moreover, said alley cat did wind up winning cat o' the year, as well as best o' breed, and for all I know best wardrobe, too, attired as it was for the playoffs that Saturday eve in the hotel ballroom (the Otto Preminger Hall, but known to all who toiled therein, including the house hookers, as the John Hall Hall) — anyway, attired as it was in gold lamé-beribboned topknot with matching booties, twinkling ruby-studded collarette with small gold bell pendant, and then the diamanté leash that was absolutely de rigueur that year, my dears."

A short but welcome diversion then occurred in which drinks were replenished, paid for by one party, and I name no names, after a forcible outburst from the party of the second part re a certain !!#$%#! Bank of America **&%$! money machine just up the street that ate up a guy's perfectly valid bank card for the second time that month. I managed to calm myself and continued:

"The long, tiresome hours passed — banquet, speeches, awards, and dance. Bill dozed in a staff cabin we'd been given for the night during most of it, no use both of us being bored stiff and, while we were on the job, remaining boozeless as well.

"At about two A.M. the last cha-cha-cha had been played and the last sagging cheek had been insincerely kissed at. I accompanied mogul, child bride, and Num Num back to their deluxe cabin out behind the main swimming pool, me carrying the trophies and a glass of buttermilk for a nightcap, the mogul the leash and one last piña colada; and his wife the winner, swaddled in a puce traveling blanket monogrammed in silver with its copious initials.

"Goodnights were exchanged," I said. "I took a last walk around — all was calm. I rejoined William in our cabin. About an hour later he went out for some air and to stretch his legs, returning

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with nothing to report. Next thing I know, came the dawn,as they are wont to even in Beverly Hills. Also came room service with breakfast, of which I partook heartily, Bill not at all. Also also, close behind, came excitement — nay, there came hysteria, there came wailings, there came lamentations, hair-pullings, anger, and blood-curdling threats of revenge and mayhem. For, somehow during the wee small hours of that gentle *noche,* Num Num Sri Lanka Segunda had vanished as totally and utterly as yesterday's stars of the silver screen, to say nothing of my boyhood curls.

"And what else came," I said, smacking my lips appreciatively over the last of my beer, "was an ultimatum from guess who to the effect that I had one hour to come up with Num Num or I'd never work in that town again and, if he had anything to say about it, and he did, I'd never work again in any town in the U.S., Canada, or Mexico big enough to have paved roads. One hour—hell, it took me all of five minutes to figure it out. While an army of hotel security men, supplemented by innumerable squad carsful of the Beverly Hills Police Department's finest men in blue combed the extensive grounds desperately seeking clues, a cursory examination of the mogul's cabana revealed to me that the kitchen window directly over Num Num's raffia basket (handwoven in caves by blind Mayan artisans), and hidden behind closed Venetian blinds, had been carelessly left open a few inches by some soon to be drawn, quartered, then hired as a scriptwriter, menial. Couple that fact with what I already knew, and voilà — the case of the vamoosed Burmese was solved."

Here I paused. And sighed. The dude sighed too. Then he had the class to signal Finnegan for one more time, although he did say a mite sourly, "That's your limit, friend," which I thought rather unnecessary. Then he said, "Bill. Your partner. What did his lack of appetite have to do with it?"

"Ever hear of a fifty-pound dog, half malamute, half dalmatian, and just a soupçon of border collie, not being hungry?" I said. "Thanks, Finnegan. And you too, sir."

"Dog?" the guy said. "What dog?"

"That there dog," I said, pointing down at the unswept floor between my stool and Molly's. "My ol' pard Bill." Hearing his name, the mutt opened one red-streaked bleary eye briefly, looked up, then closed it again. "Must've eaten every bit of Num Num up when I let him out for his walk," I said. "Including the fleece."

"Tsk, tsk," said the guy.

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"Oh," I said, "except for the bell. I found that hidden in the tatty old blanket I always took along for Bill to sleep on. His was a sort of washed-out gray color, with the monogram 'Property West Hollywood YMCA—Do Not Remove' on it."

A brief silence ensued. Then, "So it was curtains for me in that burg," I said, "from that night on, as there was no way I was going to rat on my old compadre, was there? I gave the little golden bell to my sweetheart for her charm bracelet, sold out, packed up, and moved on. Which is pretty much what I've been doing ever since, amigo—moving on."

Well, speaking of moving on, that is exactly what the dude next to me did himself shortly thereafter. Likewise as did old Molly, taking her walking flea circus with her, because Bill was her mutt, not mine. I wouldn't have minded a dog myself, but the landlady at my place of flopping at the time frowned on outside competition for her indigenous animal, rodent, and insect populations, to which one could easily add reptilian if you counted those two guys down the hall in 4-B.

Mean old time marched.

Dirty glasses emptied.

Some remained so.

But, finally, the stool vacated by Molly filled up.

I glanced idly in that direction. Unwashed jeans, not so good. But New York Knicks satin warmup jacket, better. And on his tootsies, a new pair of those outrageously expensive trainers or whatever they're called that take an airpump to blow them up.

"Pardon me, sir," I addressed the newcomer. "You look like an intelligent, well-educated man. Are you familiar with the classic dilemma which goes, your house has caught fire and you only have time to save one object from it, so which one would you choose?"

The sporting type allowed that yeah, he thought he'd heard of it somewhere.

"When I was at the height of my fame," I said, "as a private investigator to the stars, my half-a-million ranch-style home in Beverly Hills was fire-bombed one night and I faced that classic dilemma. And the one item I chose before any other, before the Hockneys, the Sèvres, the jade, even before my personally autographed photograph of Annette Funicello, was a used bus ticket from the Minneapolis-St. Paul transit system."

"No kidding," said Sporting Life, turning slightly towards me . . .●

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Art by Greg Voth

DOGWALKER

by Richard Lupoff

Farmer snapped his fingers and gestured and Bink, the big Rottie bitch, hopped out of the Olds Ciera and stood waiting for his next command. He snapped the chain-link leash onto her collar, patted her on the head, and started into the park. She ambled along at his side, pausing here and there to sniff a tree trunk, a clump of ivy, or a fallen limb. She looked at Farmer as if she could talk him into throwing a stick for her, but he gave a tug at the leash and she assented, trotting now alongside his Keds.

The park was narrow and winding, the equivalent of two or three city blocks in length, and blue maple and California scrub oak limbs met overhead, making a shadowy tunnel that ran the length of the park, only a dappling of sunlight breaking through every few score yards.

He saw the old man with the basset heading toward him, the old man placing his feet gingerly, one ahead of the other, careful to

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avoid roots and rocks that might cause him to twist an ankle and tumble to the earth, bruising his aged flesh or, worse yet, fracturing a dry, aged leg or hipbone. The basset, overweight and clearly short on exercise, waddled and panted beside his master.

Farmer smiled and waved. "Isn't it a glorious morning?"

The old man smiled back and mumbled something that Farmer couldn't make out, but it seemed vaguely agreeable. Farmer had seen the old man a few times before, in the park. Maybe it was the gray in Farmer's medium-length hair and in his mildly unkempt moustache that helped the old man feel comfortable with him.

Richard Lupoff's first story for *EQMM* is pure suspense, but in his longer fiction he shows that he also knows how to construct a clever crime puzzle. His books feature an unusual sleuthing team, an insurance investigator and a female Berkeley cop, and frequently elaborate on collectibles of various sorts: comic books, classic cars, World War II memorabilia, to name a few. Interested readers should see *The Sepia Siren Killer* (St. Martin's Press, 1995). ✝

Bink bent over the basset and snuffled.

The basset made a soft sound and wagged its long tail.

Bink wiggled her own tiny cropped tail and looked up at Farmer. He said, "Come on, girl," and to the old man, "Have a great one," and maneuvered the big Rottie around the old man and the fat basset and continued up the trail. He whistled a catchy tune he'd heard in an Alice Faye musical on AMC the night before. *You're a Sweetheart.* It stuck in his mind. *If there ever was one.* Certain kinds of songs, Farmer had never figured it out exactly, but they just did that to him. Just stuck in his mind.

If there ever was one, it's you. Sometimes he thought he was in love with Alice Faye, even though she was born in 1915, the daughter of a cop, no less.

Traffic rolled past the park on either side, new Hondas and Acuras and Nissans, a Suzuki Samurai and a Mercedes, a family in a big Volvo wagon packed to the roof with camping and fishing gear, heading out on a wholesome family vacation.

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Farmer heard voices approaching from behind him, and the crunching and rustling sounds of wheels rolling over dry twigs and brown leaves. He turned and saw a procession of boys and girls on bikes pedaling along the path. From the looks of them they averaged twelve years old. They were jabbering and screaming about their summer plans. Farmer stepped off the path, into a patch of lush green ivy. He pulled Bink with him and waved at the first of the bicyclists, a pretty girl with blond hair streaming out from under her helmet.

The pretty girl waved back at Farmer as she wheeled past. She yelled, "Thanks, mister." Farmer stood with his hand upraised, waving at the kids as they rolled along the path. Nice kids. Polite to an older man, as Farmer himself had been to the senior citizen walking his basset. Civil, their conduct was civil, as it ought to be.

Once the kids were past, Bink pulled him along the path impatiently. She leaped into the ivy, almost jerking Farmer off his feet. He yelled and caught his balance. "Silly girl, you know you can't climb a tree. Leave the squirrels alone." It had been a good winter, adequate rainfall for a change, not too cold. The spring vegetation had been lush and by summer the population of squirrels and birds in the parks had reached levels Farmer hadn't seen in years.

Halfway through the park a flight of cement steps led to the parallel street and the narrow sidewalk that marked the edge. The houses that flanked the park varied in size and architecture. Those on the uphill side of the park were larger than those on the downhill side. There were Tudors and California Mission style homes and a few redwood or brown-shingle traditionals. No Victorians in this part of town; that style seemed not to fit in with the genteel suburban feel that the neighborhood managed to achieve despite its proximity to the university and the commercial areas that nourished the city's economy.

A classic little old lady was standing at the top of the cement steps. She clutched a leash, at the end of it a white toy poodle that squealed and tugged. The LOL grasped the metal handrail that slanted beside the steps. A look of panic swept across her papery features like the shadow of a fast-moving cloud sweeping across a leached-out, lifeless field.

Farmer found the encounter intriguing. He knew the poodle, even knew its name. He'd seen it walking sedately with a plainly dressed black woman on a number of occasions. But today, the person on the other end of the leash was this elderly

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female who gave off a distinct emanation of wealth.

Farmer laughed. "There's nothing to be worried about."

The LOL seemed to relax a little, but she still clung to the handrail and the poodle continued to pull. Farmer said, "That's Dulcie, isn't it?"

The LOL nodded, seeming to relax a little more.

"This is Bink," Farmer said. "Bink and Dulcie are friends, see?" He let the Rottweiler approach the poodle. Dulcie squealed and rolled over. Bink nuzzled the poodle. The Rottie's squarish black-and-gold head was as big as the entire poodle.

The LOL relaxed some more. She reached a hand, tentatively, toward Bink, looking questioningly at Farmer. He said, "It's okay, Bink loves people, don't you, Binky girl?"

The Rottie wagged her stubby tail and massive hindquarters.

"We meet Dulcie almost every day," Farmer said. "But usually the other lady walks her. I hope . . ." He let the sentence trail away. The LOL would probably finish it for him. He was counting on that. He could see the hand on the iron rail, not the one holding the leash, was decorated with an expensive wedding ring and a matching engagement ring with a rock on it that set his mind to dancing.

"Oh, Claudie is my maid."

"I'd never have known."

"She's my friend, too."

I'll just bet she is, Farmer thought.

"She's been with me ever so long. Years and years."

Yes, but? There has to be a yes but, Farmer thought. Yes, but what?

"I couldn't get along without her. Especially since my husband . . ."

This time it was the LOL who let the sentence drift into silence. In that silence a motorcycle roared past, the driver gunning the engine as he climbed the hill.

"I understand," Farmer said, even though he didn't. He had an idea, he had an inkling, and a gentle breeze stirred the scrub-oak leaves over the stairs, letting a shaft of bright sunlight through to dance off the LOL's diamond ring. Yes, Farmer definitely had an idea. "And Claudette—"

"No, just Claudie. You know, they have these funny names sometimes."

"But she's still your friend."

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"Of course."

"Claudie."

"Oh, her grandmother, she told me, you know they live so long sometimes, but her grandmother, and of course I couldn't insist that she stay. She offered to get me someone while she's gone. Especially since my husband . . ."

"Of course, your husband."

"But I told her, No, you go ahead, your family has to come first. I can manage. You come back as soon as you can. I'll take care of everything while you're away."

The poodle sniffed at a pile of leaves, turned in a circle, and squatted. The LOL looked at Farmer.

"Well, I think Binky wants to get home for her breakfast." Farmer extended his hand to the LOL. She looked confused for a moment, then transferred Dulcie's leash to the hand holding the railing and shook Farmer's hand with the other.

"A pleasure," Farmer said. "I hope Claudia's grandmother gets better soon, and I'll see you and Dulcie here, Mrs. . . ."

The LOL's hand was like a dry, empty husk in Farmer's. He had to be careful not to crush it. Not to crush it. "Mrs. . . ." he said again.

"Clyde," she furnished, even though he'd had to clue her twice to get the answer. "And Claudie, not Claudia."

Farmer shook his head self-deprecatingly. "I'm terrible about names. Terrible. Mine is Farmer. You know, sometimes I think I'm going to forget my own name. But I always remember pets. I'd never forget Bink. Or Dulcie. Well, then . . ."

He let Bink lead him up the path, turned back for an instant, and saw Mrs. Clyde and Dulcie heading in the opposite direction, the LOL walking steadily in sensible shoes and a dress. You never saw women in dresses in the park, but Mrs. Clyde was an exception.

Bink and Farmer reached the top of the park, headed out and across the street, then walked back to where he'd left the Olds Ciera. He unlocked the passenger-side door and said, "Okay, Bink old girl, let's go home." The Rottie jumped in the car and settled down on the faded upholstery. Farmer thought, I ought to get her a mat or something before she wears right through that seat. He walked around the car and opened the driver's-side door and climbed in. On the way home he listened to an oldies station. After a commercial the disk jockey put on a cover version of "You

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Turned the Tables on Me," another Alice Faye standard, by some present-day vocalist. She was plenty good, but she was no Alice Faye.

At home he put out Bink's breakfast and set to work with a telephone book and a city map. There were a dozen Clydes listed. Farmer searched for their addresses on the city map. He managed to eliminate eight that way. They just didn't live anywhere near the park, and he knew that Mrs. Clyde—*his* Mrs. Clyde—wouldn't have come from another neighborhood just to walk Dulcie in the park.

Of the four remaining Clydes, two were listed as *Mr. and Mrs.* Farmer eliminated them. The elimination tourney was down to the finals. One of the two remaining Clydes was listed as *P. Clyde, DDS.* The other was simply, *R. Clyde,* and an address that Farmer knew was just a stone's throw from the park even without checking the map. Many women listed their telephone numbers with only first initials. Nice, androgynous initials. They discouraged obscene phone calls, or they had, maybe, until the obscene phone callers had caught on to the trick.

Farmer knew that *R. Clyde, 55 Ferndale,* was his Mrs. Clyde. "R." Was she Roberta? Rachel? Rona, Rhonda, Rolanda?

Close attention to detail, that was the key to success in any business, including Farmer's. He chose his targets with care, did not strike too often, did not return to a neighborhood where he had previously worked. He had never been arrested, never been in serious trouble, earned a good living for himself, had money in the bank and conservative investments in his portfolio, and lived a quiet, respectable life in his comfortable home with his faithful four-legged companion.

Farmer went into the bathroom and scrubbed the gray out of his hair and moustache, combed his hair carefully, and brushed his moustache into neat order. He smiled ruefully at his reflection. Mother Nature was doing her work. It wouldn't be long, at this rate, before he had to *cover* the gray instead of adding it, to change his appearance.

He let Bink out in the backyard to do her stuff, then they spent half an hour on their drills. Bink was good at the drills, she was one smart bitch, and Farmer ought to know. He loved Bink. Love, that was part of the secret of his success.

Actually she was Bink III. He'd raised the first Bink from a puppy, had built his career with her help, and had cried hot, salty

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tears when he'd had her put down. She was getting old and her hips were starting to go. These big, heavy dogs just didn't have the longevity of smaller, lighter breeds.

And then there had been Bink II. Rottweiler pups were expensive, but Farmer wouldn't settle for less than the best. And in due course Bink II had gone the way of Bink I, and Farmer had cried again, and taken some time off, and then bought Bink III and started training her. She was a great bitch, maybe the best of the three. By the time she was ready to retire, if things went well, he might be ready to do the same.

It was quite a thought.

He had a class at the community college that night, and he took Bink with him and made her stay in the Ciera while he sat through the lecture. He never used his real name when he enrolled in courses, and between such simple precautions, and moving on every so often, he figured he'd never get his degree. But what the heck, the classes were interesting and they filled the empty evenings. And once in a while he met some lonely divorcée or plain-featured, middle-aged woman, and had a fling. Nobody ever got hurt, more empty evenings got filled, and when he moved on he left pleasant memories behind to warm those lonely hearts on cold, lonely evenings.

The next day, after he'd added the gray to his hair and moustache, he let Bink out as usual. They ran through a training session, then he brought her back through the house and out the front door. They jumped into the Ciera and drove back to the park. Farmer parked the Ciera on Wilton, just off Ferndale, a couple of blocks from number fifty-five.

He walked Bink along Wilton, then turned onto Ferndale, casing the houses. He kept an eye out for pedestrians or nosy neighbors. Ferndale was a quiet street. There was nothing pretentious about it. This wasn't a section for the superwealthy. There were few if any of them in this town. But the people who lived on Ferndale were upper middle class. Very upper. They tended to have good jewelry and often serious cash in their houses. Certainly Mrs. R. Clyde had jewelry. Nice and compact and portable and convertible jewelry. And Claudie was out of town because of her grandmother. And since Mrs. Clyde's husband . . .

Farmer smiled to himself.

Number fifty-five Ferndale was a Tudor, down to the white stucco and half-timbers and the kitschy diamond-pane windows. A

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winding driveway led to an attached double garage. A row of firs lined the driveway, blocking part of the house's well-tended lawn from the street.

Perfect.

Perfect.

Frigging perfect.

He strolled around the neighborhood waiting for Mrs. Clyde to emerge from her house with Dulcie. Or—huh, maybe he'd blown the timing and the LOL was already out walking her poodle. Well, that was okay too. He just wanted to meet them again, wanted Mrs. Clyde to see him and Bink once more, preferably nearer her house than the park. Just to get her accustomed to the idea.

Just as he was thinking of giving up, of putting the whole project off till tomorrow, he heard a soft voice. "Mr.—was it Mr.—"

He turned around, smiling. "Farmer," he said. "And you're Mrs., uh—I'm so bad with names."

She smiled back at him. "Mrs. Clyde." Dulcie yapped.

"Maybe I'm just getting old," he said.

She shook her head. "Oh, no. You're a young man, Mr. Farmer."

He gave her his grateful look. "At least I remember Dulcie's name. I never forget pets."

Mrs. Clyde said, "Do you live near here, Mr. Farmer?"

"Fairly. It's just that Bink loves the little park so, and I enjoy looking at the lovely houses. Is one of them yours?" As if he didn't know damned well which was hers.

"Oh, the Tudor, you see." She gestured. "My husband and I built that house. Forty-three years ago. Forty-three years." She took a breath. "But since he—I just don't know if I—"

Farmer assumed his sympathetic expression and nodded and mumbled.

Dulcie and Bink were sniffing each other. Mrs. Clyde said, "You know, they say that certain breeds of dogs are so fierce. Dobermans and pit bulls and Rottweilers."

Farmer shook his head. "Not if you love them. Not if you raise them to be gentle and to know love and not violence. Just look at those two." He laughed.

Mrs. Clyde pulled back a sleeve of her expensive dress. The sky was clear again today, and the sun glinted on a diamond-studded wrist watch. Farmer admired it silently. Mrs. Clyde looked a little concerned.

Farmer said, "Well, we shouldn't really keep you and Dulcie any

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longer. It's just such a pleasure—" He reached down and scratched the poodle behind its ears. Its coat was as curly as a lamb's.

Mrs. Clyde said, "It was so nice," and tugged at Dulcie's leash, and headed back to number fifty-five.

That night he got ready to move. He packed his few belongings: half a dozen favorite books, a few CD's (a couple of Sinatra compilations, Mary Martin's *Songs From Rodgers and Hammerstein's The Sound of Music,* and, of course, *Alice Faye's Greatest Hits),* and his little cable-ready TV. And of course Bink's water dish and dinner dish, her favorite toys, and her spare leash and collar.

It might be nice, someday, to own a house instead of always having to rent. But when your business kept you moving around the country, that just wasn't practical. He only had to hit once every few years, once every time he moved. He'd lived in Vermont, Oklahoma, New Jersey, Florida, and now in northern California.

And of course he knew where he was headed next. He believed in careful planning. He was headed up north again, but not to Oregon. He had his eye on Idaho. Boise, Idaho.

He always hit the same way when he hit, when he and Bink hit. But each time out brought enough to last for years, and who was going to remember a hit five years ago and two or three thousand miles away? Farmer remembered. He remembered the little Sheltie in Montpelier and the miniature schnauzer in Enid and the unusual, wirehaired dachshund in that little town near Trenton. They bothered him, they really did, every one of them. But business was business. It was a safe way to work, and Farmer liked to be safe.

He got a good night's sleep. Bink always seemed to sense a big day coming up, and she climbed onto Farmer's bed when she thought he was asleep and snuggled against his legs and went to sleep, too. Farmer had a funny dream that night. He was in an old movie, wearing a scratchy woolen suit and a stiff-collared shirt, and Alice Faye was there in a low-cut Naughty Nineties gown, with an ostrich feather in her hair. They were doing a song-and-dance act to the tune of "You Say the Sweetest Things, Baby." He woke up and the woolen blanket was itching under his chin. He rubbed his eyes, reached down and rubbed Bink's muscular flank, and climbed out of bed.

An hour later he parked the Ciera a couple of blocks from Mrs. Clyde's house and got out of the car. He was in his gray-hair-and-

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moustache persona. He snapped the leash on Bink's collar, took a small plastic bottle out of the Ciera's trunk, and walked the Rottie toward Mrs. Clyde's house. Farmer looked around cautiously, led Bink into the cover of the firs, and knelt beside her. He pulled a large, heavy-gauge rubber band from his pocket and worked it up over Bink's right front leg, all the way to the shoulder. He opened the plastic bottle and poured its contents over Bink's right front shoulder. He tossed the empty bottle into the fir trees. He straightened up, grasped Bink's leash in his hand, and started running toward the front door of number fifty-five.

He wasn't in great shape, actually, and he managed to look disheveled by the time they reached the front door. He was panting a little, maybe a little more than he needed to. Bink had tried to run with him, but the heavy rubber band around her shoulder was uncomfortable and she wound up with a limping, rolling gait.

Farmer pounded on the door, gasping and calling softly, as if he didn't have the breath to raise his voice, to be let in. Bink raised her dripping and rubber-banded leg and scratched at the door.

After a few seconds that seemed like a year, the door swung back a couple of inches. Mrs. Clyde looked out, her pale blue eyes wide and her china-white skin looking more delicate than ever. Somewhere out of sight, the toy poodle Dulcie was yapping.

Farmer gasped, "That hoodlum! He hit poor Binky and he never even stopped. He could have stopped. He could have taken us to the vet's."

The rubber band must have made Bink's shoulder sore because she whined and bit at it. Perfect. Per-fect.

"Can you — she's bleeding." Some of the phony blood from the plastic bottle must have splashed on Farmer's face. He hadn't even thought of that, but it was even better that way.

Mrs. Clyde said, "Mr. Farmer—"

"Please—Binky."

"Of course. Come—" She stepped away from the door. Farmer pushed it wide open. He took a couple of wobbly steps inside, Bink leaning against his thigh. Mrs. Clyde said, "I'll telephone. They'll send somebody."

Farmer sank to his knees. He put his arms around Bink and worked the heavy rubber band loose. More of the phony blood got on his face and hands. Mrs. Clyde had picked up the telephone. Little Dulcie had run into the room and was staring at Bink.

The room had a high cathedral ceiling with dark wooden beams.

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The walls carried out the kitschy Tudor theme. The floor was of huge flagstones with expensive-looking area rugs and an antique-looking refectory table.

Dulcie had run up to Bink. The big Rottie leaned over the poodle, baring her teeth. The poodle rolled on her back, squealing.

Farmer surveyed the room one last time, to make sure that everything was right. It was. "Now, Binky, get 'er!"

Mrs. Clyde and Dulcie screamed simultaneously as Bink sank her teeth into the poodle's guts. She picked up the poodle, gave it one furious shake, and flung it across the room. The poodle's screaming stopped as it smacked against the refectory table and tumbled onto a rug. Mrs. Clyde's screaming got louder.

Farmer pointed at the LOL and grunted, "Now, Binky, get 'er!"

The Rottweiler sprang at the old woman.

Farmer heard a whining sound and looked around. From a back hallway, an electric wheelchair rolled steadily into the room. The man in it was ancient, wizened. A lap robe covered him from the waist down. Farmer hadn't seen anything like that since some Raymond Chandler flick on TV.

The old man.

Mrs. Clyde had said, "Since my husband . . ." And again, "Since my husband . . ." Farmer had thought she meant, since her husband had died, and was too bereft to speak the words. But she must have meant, since her husband became crippled.

But only from the waist down.

From the waist up he looked okay. Old and weak, but okay. And too far away from Farmer or from Bink for either of them to keep him from firing the double-barreled shotgun that he was pointing in front of him.

Still, Farmer pointed at the old man and ordered, "Now, Binky, get 'im!"

The Rottweiler abandoned what was left of Mrs. Clyde and charged across the room. Farmer saw the flash of the shotgun, then heard its explosion, then felt the impact of a full load of pellets smash into his chest and hurl him back through the still-open front door. He looked straight up at the brilliant sky. He heard the shotgun roar a second time but he didn't know whether Mr. Clyde had hit Binky or missed her. ●

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TRAIN TO LUXOR

by Edward D. Hoch

Ahmed Moneim settled into the plush green seat of the first-class passenger car and lit a Cleopatra cigarette, gazing out at the Nile River and a large-sailed felucca transporting building stones to Luxor. He would have liked to think that his train would arrive long before the sailing craft, but with some thirty-five stops along the route he knew it would be eleven hours before he was safe in his hotel. The faster express train on the same run would be too closely watched. Better to travel the slow, safe route.

His original plan was to fly directly from Aswan to Cairo, but he knew they would be watching the airport. Better to travel north along the Nile by boat or by train as far as Luxor, then take a plane the rest of the way. The train seemed safer and more comfortable, so long as there was a first-class car.

He was aware that an attractive young woman in a yellow dress had taken the seat opposite him as the train picked up speed. She appeared European, possibly British, and wore her shoulder-length brown hair in a pageboy style he hadn't seen in years. "Pardon me," she said after a moment, in perfect, unaccented English. "Do you travel this line often?"

"I fear not," he answered apologetically. "Usually I fly between Aswan and Cairo."

Ed Hoch's Jeffrey Rand was conceived in 1964, at the height of the Cold War, when fictional secret agents like James Bond were popular reading and there was a ready-made backdrop for international intrigue. That Rand has survived to the present era may be due to the fact that unlike other secret agents of the period, he was always more involved in the solution of a traditional murder mystery than with espionage. †

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"I was wondering about those tour boats. Are they comfortable?"

A large triple-decked white cruise boat had come into view on the river, and the tourists waved to them as the train passed it by. "Comfortable, yes. And popular. It is possible to fly from Cairo to Aswan to see the dam and the temples, returning all the way by cruise boat. However, tourists are usually advised to switch to air travel north of Luxor because of the political unrest among the Islamic militants. Especially in Middle Egypt, around El Minya and Assiut, they've been known to fire on trains and boats."

"How awful!"

A grim-faced Egyptian conductor made his way through the car, checking tickets and occasionally answering someone's question. He paused when he reached the young woman, and actually allowed himself a slight smile. "Are you traveling alone, miss?"

"Yes, I am, as far as Luxor." She handed over her ticket, which he punched before returning it.

"You will find these first-class cars quite comfortable." From his pocket he took out a white bag that gave off a minty aroma. A vender had passed through earlier selling them. The conductor selected a wrapped candy and offered it to her. "Please take—"

His words were cut short by a sudden shattering of glass a few seats away. A woman screamed and Ahmed Moneim only had time to glimpse riflemen on the opposite bank of the river firing at the train. Then the conductor was shouting, "Down! Get down! Terrorist attack!"

Ahmed Moneim heard the thud of more bullets piercing the train. Then he felt a sudden sharp pain and nothing more.

As Rand and his wife Leila approached late middle age, she seemed drawn back to Egypt every couple of years. It was her father's homeland, though her mother had been British, and Rand could understand this need to return to her roots. The country had always held a fascination for him as well. It was, after all, the place where they had met. Next to the sights and smells of Cairo, it was the Nile that held the most attraction for them. Ninety-eight percent of the country's population lived along the river.

On this trip, they had flown from Cairo to the Aswan and planned to journey back by train, something they had never done before. It wasn't until the last of their three nights at the Amun Tourist Village that something happened to make them question their plan. Their chalet overlooked Lake Nasser, formed by construction of the Aswan High Dam, and one reason they had cho-

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sen the place was its location only ten minutes from the airport.

"It's a lovely view," Leila said, breathing in the night air from the balcony of the restaurant. "I'm going to hate returning to damp old England."

Rand admitted it had been a damp spring there, while here in Egypt the temperature was already beginning its climb. During summers in the south the thermometer could hit 120 degrees. "Did you get our train tickets for tomorrow?" he asked.

Leila nodded. "There was a man in a galabia—one of those long robes—who stood behind me in line and seemed to be watching me. He made me nervous."

Rand chuckled. "You're still an attractive woman, Leila. You should be used to men watching you by this time."

"It wasn't that," she insisted. "I know the difference."

He thought no more about the man in the galabia, but the following morning as they arrived at the train station he noticed several male travelers wearing the garments. The train was crowded, mainly with laborers from the nearby rock quarries returning home for monthly visits with their families. They rode in unpainted third-class coaches; as Rand and Leila passed by he could see them through the windows, taking up every inch of space and even climbing into the overhead luggage racks to sleep. The second-class coaches held family groups and children for the most part, and by the time they reached the single first-class car near the front of the train the passengers consisted almost entirely of western tourists and well-dressed Egyptians. Their seats were numbers eleven and twelve, facing forward. Rand let Leila have the one by the window with its unobstructed view of the Nile.

One middle-aged passenger, with graying hair and a moustache, wore the uniform of a colonel in the Egyptian army. As the train started up, he crossed the aisle and asked if he could join them in an empty seat. Rand was immediately suspicious. The man did not look the sort to be seeking companionship.

"I am Colonel Zagab of the counter-terrorist force," he announced quite openly, relaxing in the plush window seat opposite Leila. He carried a slender black attaché case which he placed on the floor between his legs.

"Mr. and Mrs. Rand," Leila said, always one to make friends.

He began a conversation with her, seeming to ignore Rand for the moment. "Is this your first time in our country?"

"No," Leila replied. "I was born here. My father was Egyptian."

"Ah! I welcome your return."

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"My husband and I are only here for a week."

"It is beautiful country at this time of the year." Finally his dark eyes shifted to Rand. "And you, sir. What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm retired."

"Ah!" Perhaps because Rand showed no desire to continue the conversation, Colonel Zagab lifted the attaché case from the floor and opened it. Inside was a battery-operated laptop computer, and he immediately set to work.

Something about the whole situation bothered Rand. He excused himself and walked to the toilet at the rear of the car. When he returned, he made a point of glancing at the screen of the colonel's computer. He was startled to see a younger version of his own face staring back at him.

"I trust your information is more recent than that picture," Rand said, reclaiming his seat next to Leila. She glanced at him sharply, not understanding his words.

Colonel Zagab's grim lips relaxed slowly into a smile of sorts. "I see it is time to end the pretense, Mr. Rand."

"What is all this?" Leila demanded.

"The colonel is on this train because we are. My picture and intelligence file are on his computer screen. I imagine that man behind you while you bought your tickets was one of his people."

This brought a chuckle from the dark-eyed colonel. "I always tell Hassem he is too noticeable." The smile vanished and he was all business. "I believe we are investigating the same matter, Mr. Rand, though I am surprised the British government is still interested in our affairs."

"My husband is retired," Leila insisted. "He is no longer who you think he is."

"Ah, but I have all that here!" He turned the laptop for them to view. Leila gasped when she saw the photograph. "Retired from Concealed Communications many years back, but still available for special assignments. I speak of the death of Ahmed Moneim."

"I never heard the name before this instant," Rand answered truthfully.

"He was shot by terrorists while aboard this very train one week ago yesterday. They fired on the train from across the river and caught him in the right temple. He died instantly."

"He was important to you?"

"I believe you know just how important."

"Was he equally important to the terrorists, or was his death mere happenstance?"

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"That is but one of our puzzles. Even if they knew in advance which seat he'd be occupying, could they have aimed with such accuracy at a moving target?"

Leila glanced apprehensively out the window, where a felucca was gliding slowly along the river with its cargo. "The gunmen could have been in a speedboat," she suggested, "keeping pace with the train."

"No, the conductor and several passengers saw them firing from the opposite bank. There have been other attacks, though usually farther north."

"Believe me," Rand told him, "we know nothing of this man Moneim or his death. You'd better update your computer and take me off the active list."

The colonel bowed slightly. "If you say so, I accept your word." He left them soon after that, as the train pulled into one of its many stops on the journey to Luxor. "Perhaps we will meet again," he said. "I wish you both a pleasant journey."

They watched him cross the platform and enter the stationmaster's office. "Phoning ahead to have us watched," Rand guessed.

"Do you think so?"

"He gave up too easily. At the next stop I think I'll make a call of my own if there's time."

Rand phoned the British embassy in Cairo and spoke with a woman named Polly Planter. He'd known her slightly when she worked in the London office of British Intelligence. The overseas operations branch was still designated MI6 in those days, and he remembered Polly's frustration at being stuck in London rather than some exotic foreign capital. The Cairo embassy post was something of a first for a woman, no doubt brought about by the appointment of a woman to head the entire Intelligence operation.

"Polly, Rand here."

"Rand where?" she asked.

"Sorry. I'm calling from the railroad station at Kom Ombo. It looks like some Pharaoh's temple and there are vendors at all the train windows. My wife and I are on holiday. I've been approached by a Colonel Zagab. Know him?"

"Yes."

"He thinks I'm here looking into the killing of a man named Ahmed Moneim on the train between Aswan and Luxor last week. He was killed by terrorist rifle fire from across the river."

She was silent for a moment. "Do you remember your old ID

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number? I'm looking at it on my computer screen."

He gave it to her and waited. Presently she said, "Kom Ombo. Are you traveling north or south?"

"North. Toward Luxor."

"Your next major stop will be Edfu in about two hours. I'll fax the information to our man there. Look for a snake charmer at the station. He'll know you from your picture."

"Thanks, Polly."

"Let me know if you discover anything."

He returned to the train and joined Leila, telling her about the phone call. "What are you getting into?" she wanted to know. "We're on holiday."

"It might be wise to really know what Zagab thinks I know."

They spent the next two hours in casual talk, with each other and with the conductor when he came through to check their tickets. The train hugged the fertile strip of land along the right bank of the Nile, never once venturing off into the desert. They passed mud-brick villages with occasional fields of corn and sunflowers, even a rice paddy. He could tell Leila was displeased with his call to Cairo. "You're meeting a snake charmer in Edfu? My God, Jeffrey, I thought that life was behind us!"

But soon the signs for Edfu came into view, and then the city itself. It was in striking contrast to most of the other towns they'd passed through thus far, and many of the tourists left the train to cross the bridge over the muddy brown Nile. They were headed for one of the best-preserved temples in Egypt, its tower already visible in the center of town.

Rand followed along and mingled with the tourists, some of whom had gathered around a native snake charmer playing his flute for a reluctant cobra. At last the serpent appeared, poking its flattened head over the edge of the basket. When the hypnotic music ceased, the cobra once again retreated into the basket while the native smilingly accepted donations.

"Wait just a moment," the snake charmer urged in English, "while I tell you of an old Edfu ceremony — the ritual of the ten harpoons." He drew forth that many short spears, each with paper taped around its shaft, and passed them out to ten of the spectators who had been generous in their donations. Rand accepted his with a reluctant smile. "In ancient times the hippopotamus was the symbol of Seth, enemy of the sun. In the ritual, the hippo is slain with these harpoons and the sun rises triumphant. Take them as my personal gifts, souvenirs of your visit to Edfu."

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Those who had received the harpoons made an additional contribution and then drifted into the city. Only Rand returned to the waiting train. "I was watching from the window," Leila told him.

"He puts on quite a show." He carefully cut the tape holding the paper to the shaft of the spear and unrolled it. Polly Planter had faxed a four-page report on Ahmed Moneim and his death. As the train shuddered into motion and started to pick up speed, he settled back to read.

Moneim had been an agent of the Egyptian government, assigned to infiltrate the Islamic militant movement following a growing number of terrorist attacks on trains and buses carrying foreign tourists. His specific assignment was to track down and identify a terrorist leader known as Safaga, after a port on the Red Sea. So little was known about Safaga that he could even have been a woman. If Moneim ever learned the truth, it died with him on that train to Luxor.

The conductor and several other passengers had seen him conversing in English with a brown-haired woman believed to be English or French. She had disappeared after the attack on the train, apparently jumping off when the engineer stopped at the next town to get medical attention for the wounded passengers. As always in cases of train attacks, the terrorists had limited their targets to the first-class coaches carrying tourists, merchants, and government officials. Every closed window on the river side of the first-class cars had been shattered by bullets. Five passengers had been cut by flying glass and Ahmed Moneim in seat eleven had been killed by a bullet through the right temple. The official autopsy report followed.

Rand read the seat number twice before he realized it was the same number as the one occupied by Leila at his side.

"Did you finish reading it?" Leila asked after a few moments.

"Yes. It's the usual thing." He folded the pages and slipped them into his pocket. "The terrorists seem to be everywhere these days."

She glanced out the window at the river and the opposite bank. "I certainly hope they're not out there today."

"According to the report, there had been six train attacks in this region during the past three years, wounding two dozen people, before Moneim's death last week. More and deadlier attacks have occurred north of Luxor, including the bombing of buses."

At the next stop policemen entered the train carrying AK-47 assault rifles. They seemed to be studying the passengers but they

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asked no questions as they moved on to the second-class cars. "Do you think they're looking for us?" Leila asked.

"I doubt it. If they were, they'd have found us."

The long afternoon drifted slowly into dusk. Stationmasters along the route lighted kerosene lanterns, and occasionally neon signs could be seen, even on the hovels where families sat in the dirt eating their dinner. A few fires burned in the distance. Rand was rereading the faxed pages from Polly Planter while Leila dozed, and suddenly a thought struck him. They had passed the place of the murderous attack shortly after noon, at about the same time that Ahmed Moneim was killed. He left his seat and went in search of the conductor.

He found the uniformed man with his leathery, sun-baked skin standing between the cars smoking a cigarette. "How's the trip going?" Rand asked.

"Fine." The conductor took out a pack of Cleopatra cigarettes. "Want one? Or a piece of mint candy?"

"No, thanks. I heard there was a terrorist attack on this line last week. Were you on board then?"

The conductor nodded. "I was. Tried to save a passenger and almost got a bullet for my trouble. He died right at my feet."

"Ahmed Moneim?"

"I think that was his name. Damned militants! They kill innocent people."

"Was this the very car it happened in?"

The conductor shook his head. "That car's still in the shop for repairs. They are all quite similar, though that train was the local making thirty-five stops. This one only makes six." He took another puff on his cigarette and flicked the butt off into the gathering darkness.

"Did Moneim say anything before he died."

The conductor shook his head. "Not to me. You should ask the girl who was with him."

"What girl was that?" Rand asked, remembering the description in the official report.

"British, I think. Quite attractive. I'd seen her before on this line. She usually gets on and off at Esna."

"That's the next stop, isn't it?"

"Correct. It's the last major stop before Luxor. The militants used to stay north of Luxor, but lately they've been stepping up their attacks around Esna. Last week, of course, they struck even farther south."

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Rand stayed with him as the train pulled into Esna, where yet another ancient temple awaited visitors brave enough to spend the night. A few passengers were waiting to board, and the conductor indicated one of them. "There is the woman you ask about, the one who was speaking with the man before he was shot."

"Thank you," Rand said. He followed her into the first-class coach, at the opposite end from where Leila dozed. "Could I speak with you for a moment?" he asked.

"Are you police or press?" she asked wearily, putting down her small overnight bag. Her brown hair was worn at shoulder length, rolled under in a sort of curl. Rand guessed she was still in her twenties, with soft pale skin that seemed out of place in Egypt.

"Neither. I just want to ask you about the man who was killed."

"Ahmed Moneim, though I didn't know his name then. I asked him about the tour boats on the river; we talked about the terrorist attacks. I told him it was my first time on an Egyptian train."

"Which wasn't true."

Her eyes shot up to meet his. "Why do you say that?"

"The conductor told me you often board or leave the train at this stop. Do you have business in Esna?"

She ignored the question and glanced at the watch on her wrist. "Why aren't we going? What's the delay?"

Rand had no immediate answer. A vendor came through the stopped train, selling confections in tall white bags, leaving a strong odor of mint in his wake. "They may be taking on water," he said finally, though he doubted if water was needed to operate a diesel locomotive.

"That minty odor reminds me of the day the man was shot by the terrorists. The conductor was just giving me a mint when it happened. He pushed us both to the floor." She glanced at her watch. "I must reach Luxor by ten o'clock."

"I believe it's the next stop. There shouldn't be much delay unless they shunt us off on a siding to allow an express train to pass." He held out his hand. "We should introduce ourselves. I'm Jeffrey Rand, a retired civil servant."

"Helen Constant. I deal in art objects."

"From the tombs?"

She flushed slightly. "That would be illegal."

"But you do travel this route often?"

"Too often, these days. I don't like being shot at."

"Do you think the terrorists were aiming at the man they killed?"

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"Who knows? They could have seen him through a telescopic sight. It would not be a difficult shot for a trained sniper."

"You know something of firearms."

She was starting to respond when the door of the coach sprang open to admit two army officers. The one in the lead was Colonel Zagab. He glanced in Rand's direction without acknowledging him, then said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to report an unfortunate delay. The tracks ahead have been blocked by rocks and timber, apparently by terrorists. We were fortunate to discover it before your train reached that spot. The tracks are being cleared, but you may be delayed for an hour or longer."

There were groans from the passengers and a low gasp from Helen Constant. "I must find a telephone," she said.

Rand left his seat to approach the colonel. "You got here quickly."

"Good evening, Mr. Rand. I did not expect us to meet again so soon. I was flying back to Cairo along the tracks when my pilot spotted the barricade just at dusk. We returned and landed here to stop the train."

"Are we free to get off?"

"Certainly. But I would advise everyone to remain close to the station. The streets here are not well lighted and some terrorists may be in the town."

Rand returned to his seat to inform a drowsy Leila of the situation. She grumbled at the delay and went back to sleep. He returned to Helen Constant and suggested they get off for a few minutes. "We'd better go looking for that telephone. You're not going to make Luxor by ten o'clock. We'll be lucky if we're there by midnight."

The phone at the station was out of order and one of the soldiers directed them to a telephone box at Aladdin's Tent, a nearby restaurant and cabaret. As the name suggested, it was located in a large tent and had a raised stage at one end. A group of local musicians was performing as they entered, accompanying a belly dancer more adept at shaking her body than at any true dancing. Helen went off to make her call while Rand picked a table and ordered two cups of Turkish coffee.

When she returned she watched the dancer for a moment and said, "The good ones are all at the big hotels in Cairo and Alexandria. Down here you get beginners and has-beens."

"We were talking about the man on the train with you, the one who was killed."

"Were we?"

"What color dress were you wearing that day?"

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She gave him an odd look and seemed to think about it. "Yellow, I believe. Yes, I was wearing my yellow dress, very full and long. Women must dress appropriately in this part of the world. What difference does the color of my dress make?"

"Were you seated opposite Moneim?"

She nodded.

"Then they could have spotted your yellow dress in the train window and fired at the man seated opposite you."

"No, no! I usually don't like to ride backwards on trains, but it was the only window seat remaining. The others had all been purchased in advance."

The musicians had grown louder and they were forced to cease their conversation. Rand sipped his coffee, wondering what he'd expected to find out from this woman. In a world where he'd been trained to suspect everyone, he thought of Colonel Zagab and wondered if the tracks ahead were really blocked.

They finished their coffee and left Aladdin's Tent, heading in the general direction of the bridge that would take them across the river to the waiting train. "Have you ever heard of a terrorist leader named Safaga?" Rand asked.

"I have heard the name. He is well known among the militants in this part of the country."

"But you've never seen him?"

She shook her head. "Terrorists are not often interested in art treasures."

The shops along the street were closed now, and only an occasional child could be seen hurrying home through the darkness. Somewhere in the distance a dog was barking. Rand could remember a time when boys in almost every town sold hashish to foreigners on the street. Happily, those days were gone, though hash was still smoked by many Egyptians.

He wondered what had brought those memories to mind, and then realized there was a pungent odor of hashish in the night air. Almost at once he saw the two men emerge from the shadows, wearing long galabias and turbans. One of them grabbed Helen Constant while the other came at Rand. He had never been one for hand-to-hand combat, but he ducked under the man's arms and butted him in the stomach. There was a rewarding grunt and the man staggered back. The other one was already dragging Helen into the shadows while she tried to fight him off.

"Let her go!" Rand shouted. "I can have soldiers here in seconds!"

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The man he'd butted, recovering himself, spoke in thick English. "Stay out of this! We only want the woman."

"You're not getting her." Rand dived at the one holding Helen and that was his mistake. The other assailant swung at him and he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder and neck. He went down hard in the dust as they dragged the screaming woman away.

Rand got to his knees, staggering to stand upright, as soldiers came running from the bridge. One was the officer he'd seen earlier with Colonel Zagab. "What happened here?"

"They took Helen Constant, one of the passengers! That way!"

"Who was it?"

"Two Arabs, maybe terrorists. I smelled hashish on them."

Two of the soldiers ran off in pursuit while the officer remained with Rand. "You'd better return to the train, sir. We'll take care of the woman."

Reluctantly he headed for the bridge while the officer, a captain, went off after his men. Only the thought of Leila on the train by herself made him go. If there was a second attack on the train itself he needed to be with her.

But she was fine. He found her conversing with a young man who'd been seated across the aisle from them. "Jeffrey, this is Mark Kreisler. He's an American touring the tombs and temples."

"Pleased to meet you," Rand said, shaking hands.

The young man, his dark hair reaching down over the collar of his shirt, immediately asked, "Is it true we're in danger of a terrorist attack? Your wife says a man was killed on this line just last week."

"I think Colonel Zagab has matters well under control," Rand answered reassuringly. He thought it best not to mention the apparent kidnapping of Helen Constant.

Moments later Zagab returned. "I am pleased to report that the tracks are clear. Your journey to Luxor will resume shortly."

Some passengers cheered, and when he repeated his message in Arabic the rest joined in. Rand left his seat and intercepted the colonel before he moved on to the next car. "What about that missing woman? Have you found her?"

"My men overtook the kidnappers and freed her. She will be here momentarily."

Rand breathed a bit easier when he saw Helen Constant emerge from the shadows across the river and walk over the bridge with one of the Egyptian soldiers as an escort. He left the train to meet her. "Are you all right?"

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She nodded. "They were high on hash."

"I could smell it," Rand agreed.

"When they realized the soldiers were chasing us they let me go and kept on running."

"I'm glad you're unharmed."

"What about you? I saw one of them hit you."

"I was just a bit dazed for a moment. Come on, I'm sitting up front with my wife."

Leila was still chatting with the American when Helen and Rand joined them. He quickly introduced Helen and went over the events of the past hour.

"That's terrible!" Leila gasped. "You could have been killed!"

There was a forward lurch as the train started up. The final run to Luxor had begun.

There was nothing to see but darkness out the train windows, but Rand kept watch anyway. "What are you looking for?" Leila asked.

"Campfires. You can see them a long way off at night."

"Colonel Zagab and his men are on board. That should ensure our safety."

"Perhaps."

One of the soldiers came through the coach at that moment, pulling down the shades on the windows. "What's the trouble?" Helen asked.

"We are near the place where the tracks were blocked. It is a dangerous area and the lighted windows present too good a target."

Mark Kreisler, the American, found the whole thing exciting. "And to think that I could have had a dull plane ride back!"

The conductor came through collecting tickets for the final leg of the journey, but the first-class coach had added no new passengers except for Helen Constant. With the shades drawn on the windows, Rand no longer had the night to gaze at. He turned his attention to the others.

Helen was telling of her experiences in the art business, buying and selling Egyptian artifacts. "One has to know the laws," she said. "Robbing tombs is illegal, of course, and so is removing certain artifacts from the country. But good money can still be made operating within the law."

"Is it true," the American asked, "that the laws favor Egyptian citizens in these matters?"

"Sometimes," Helen Constant agreed. "I know they're always after me for one thing or another."

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Before they could continue, Colonel Zagab joined them. "We're past the worst areas now," he said, trying to make his voice reassuring. "There should be no danger of attack."

"Have you been to Luxor before?" Kreisler asked Rand.

"Many times. It was the ancient city of Thebes, of course. By the mid-19th century it had become a small town nestled among the ruins of its former glory. In this century the old Temple of Luxor has become the center of a new city. I think it has about 150,000 people now, and it's one of the country's top tourist attractions."

It was approaching midnight when the conductor finally announced they were pulling into Luxor. Helen Constant breathed an audible sigh of relief and gathered up her purse and overnight bag.

Rand and Leila picked up their things and prepared to leave the train along with the American. A smile formed on Rand's lips as he saw the conductor pull the tall bag of mint candy from his pocket again. As each passenger left the first-class coach, he removed a wrapped piece from the bag and offered it to them. Helen smiled as she approached him and he reached into the bag.

"No!" Rand shouted at the last instant, plunging forward. Suddenly it was all clear to him.

The conductor turned, raising the white bag as the heel of Rand's hand knocked it aside. There was a sudden gunshot as the conductor went down in the doorway with Rand on top of him.

"Gun in the candy bag," Rand gasped, only just aware that the bullet had grazed his arm. "Get the colonel! This is the man who killed Ahmed Moneim. This is Safaga the terrorist!"

Later, after the conductor had been taken away and Rand's minor flesh wound tended to, there was time for explanations in the dimly lit Luxor station. "Certainly he had a small pistol inside that bag of candy," Colonel Zagab agreed, "but how does that prove he killed Ahmed Moneim last week? Riflemen were firing at the train from across the river."

"It's true they might have done the job with a lucky or skillful shot," Rand agreed. "But Safaga isn't the sort to take chances. Moneim had betrayed him and had to die for it. Think about the autopsy report and you'll know Moneim couldn't have been killed by the riflemen. His fatal wound was in the *right* temple, which you told me, Colonel, even before I read the autopsy report. He was facing forward in the car, actually in the same numbered seat as Leila. The railroad runs along the east bank of the Nile, and

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the terrorists were firing from across the river. He might have been shot in the left temple, or even in the face or forehead if he was looking out at the time, but a bullet fired from across the river could not have hit him where it did, in the right temple. He was shot by someone in the coach with him."

"Miss Constant was there too," Colonel Zagab pointed out. "She could have killed him."

"A possibility, but not too likely in view of this evening's events. Those kidnappers would have killed her given half the chance. And Safaga had a good try at it just now. He would have shot her and escaped in the confusion. Remember, it was the conductor who pulled Helen and Moneim to the coach floor when the shooting started. Only he was in a position to deliver the fatal shot. Helen told me he was offering some mints just as the shooting started. He was expecting the attack and arranged to be by their seats at the right moment. The gunfire would have covered the sound of his shot, and I'm sure he fired through layers of cloth in the bottom of the candy bag so there'd be no powder burns."

"The conductor is the murderer. Does that make him Safaga?"

"Look at his dark, leathery skin. That's not the skin of a man who's spent much time as a train conductor. He's lived most of his life outdoors, under the sun. Add to that the fact that he had to know exactly when and where last week's train attack would take place. He's either Safaga himself or a top lieutenant. I'm betting on Safaga."

"Why was he so anxious to kill Miss Constant?"

"She was there. She saw him kill Moneim, even if she didn't realize it at the time. He must have feared some morning she'd wake up remembering everything and know he was the killer. He couldn't take that chance."

Leila and Helen said goodbye to each other, and the colonel went off with his prisoner. "Thank you for saving my life," Helen said to Rand.

"I'm no hero. It was just something that happened. I'm just glad I was more successful than with those kidnappers earlier."

Colonel Zagab had arranged overnight accommodations in Luxor for Rand and Leila. He wanted a statement from Rand before they continued on to Cairo in the morning. "Will you continue your journey by train?" he asked.

It was Leila who answered. "No, your trains are far too exciting for us. We'll be flying the rest of the way." ●

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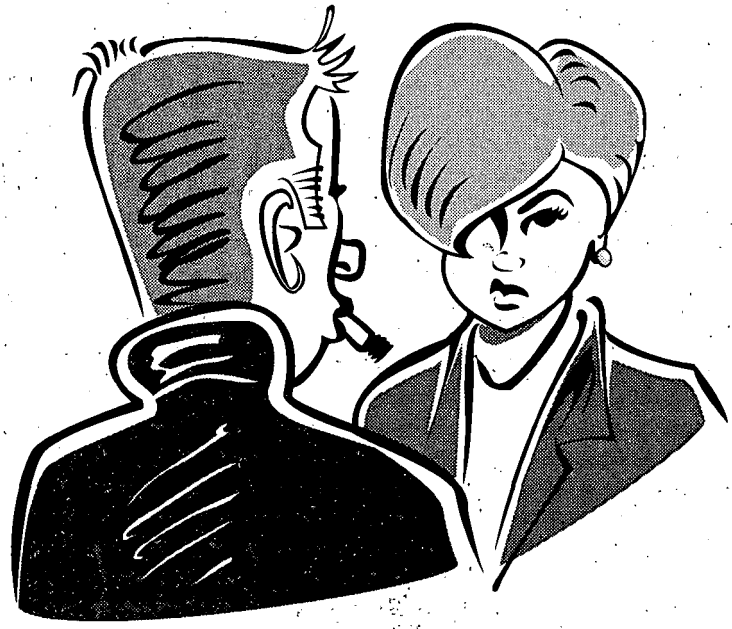

Art by Anthony Bari

CONSULTATION

by John Large

The P.I. gazed upon the girl
And sized her up like this:
"Apparently, you're half my age,
A pretty teenage miss;

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Your hair is chic and really blond,
Your garb is class, per se.
The sum of which defines you as
An evil stalker's prey."

"Amazing!" cried the comely girl.
"Not really," he denied.
"My observation's rather keen,
My knowledge very wide."

"I mean," said she, "amazing that
Someone could be so wrong.
I'm twenty-five, my hair is dyed,
The clothes cost me a song."

"Oh, well," he said, offhandedly,
"I'm slightly out of line,
But trust me lady, if you please,
And make your problem mine."

"I have a constant urge," said she,
"To rub all lawyers out,
To murder every one of them
Till there's not one about!"

"I think you'd better heed my words,"
Advised the private eye.
"I can't control your wicked yen,
But let's give this a try:

Kill all the lawyers, save the one
You'll find in twilight zone,
For at your trial, you're going to need
A Clarence Darrow clone."

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MURDER MYTH-BEGOTTEN

by Steven Saylor

"For the ancient Greeks," the lecturer intoned in her breathy, oddly urgent voice, "revenge was a *positive* function. It was not a disruption or affront to the order of the universe. On the contrary, vengeance was a means to restore order, to set the balance right. Violence must be answered with violence, murder with murder. Revenge killing, justified and sanctioned by the gods — indeed, often demanded by them — was a way to reverse the chaos set in motion by a previous, unjust murder, to *undo* that murder, as it were, and thus restore the universe as it should be. This positive view of revenge must be kept in mind as we consider the various revenge killings in the works of the great Classical playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides."

The following story is not, like Mr. Saylor's previous work for us, set in Ancient Rome, but it does employ elements of classical history—this time via the plays of Euripides, which his contemporary characters treat with more than academic interest. Mr. Saylor's latest novel of Ancient Rome is *A Murder on the Appian Way* (St. Martin's; 6/96). †

In the last row of the auditorium, Orrin and Elena sat side by side. While the other, younger students hunched over their fold-up desktops scribbling notes, the brother and sister looked straight at the speaker with rapt expressions on their faces.

"This reverence for revenge transcended the sacred bonds of family," Professor Paulo continued. "When revenge was demanded, even the closest, most intimate ties of blood were dissolved. Thus, as we shall see in the great mythic story of matricide handled by all three playwrights, even the murder of a mother by her children could be sanctioned by the gods."

Her eyes on Professor Paulo, Elena reached for Orrin's hand. He

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smiled and twined his finger with hers. The two of them listened fascinated to the lecture, holding hands.

"Cly-taem-nes-tra, Mother. It's not that hard to pronounce," said Orrin.

"I'm not stupid. I could pronounce it if I wanted to." Maria tossed the book onto the coffee table. "I just don't have any interest in that old Greek stuff. That was your father's hobby, not mine. Maybe he'd have made something of himself if he'd gone into Classics instead of becoming a scientist. Doctor Jay Sondheim, big-shot man of science." She smirked. "You know what I'd always say, whenever he'd try to drag me down to hear some lecture on the campus, or watch some old Greek tragedy put on by the drama department?"

Orrin and Elena gritted their teeth in unison. Yes, they knew what she'd said. They'd heard her repeat it a thousand times before, in that grating Oklahoma twang that thirty years in California had never gotten rid of.

"I'd say to Jay, 'Sorry, buddy, ain't interested. You know how I feel about ancient history—it's ancient history!'" She gave a boozy laugh. Orrin and Elena cringed. Next she'd be telling the one that ended with, "It's Greek to me!"

Maria picked up the book to glance at the spine before tossing it back on the table. "*Justifications for Revenge Killing in Greek Tragedy,* by A. Paulo. Well, the two of you certainly inherited your father's taste in books. Pseudointellectual claptrap!" She gave her daughter a hard look. "Elena—is that really the best you can do?"

"What are you talking about, Mother?"

"I'm talking about your hair. Your face. And your fingernails—for God's sake, a girl your age hasn't got any business biting her fingernails."

"I'm not a girl, Mother."

"Don't I know it! You're not getting any younger, honey. I don't see many young men beating a path to our door."

"Not to see *me,* anyway," said Elena under her breath.

"What, dear?"

"Nothing."

"I heard you. You have a fresh mouth, Elena. Well, it's my business who I see on my own time. Maybe if you had a date yourself once in a while you wouldn't be such a bitch. You might even start to act like a normal person."

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"Maybe if I could afford to go to a high-price salon like you do, I'd be as beautiful as you, Mother, and then I'd get more dates."

"What's that supposed to mean? Your allowance is plenty generous, and how you spend it is completely up to you. Frankly, I'd prefer to see you spending it on your looks instead of wasting it all on books and tuition, year after year. My two children, the world's oldest living undergraduates. Students forever! Orrin, make yourself useful and pour me a drink."

"Another one, Mother?"

"You heard me."

Maria got up from the sofa, walked across the parquet floor, and opened the big sliding-glass door that opened onto the deck. Across the bay the fog was pouring in through the Golden Gate and swallowing San Francisco, but here in the hills above Berkeley the sun was shining and the birds were singing in the eucalyptus trees. Orrin and Elena followed her onto the deck. Maria sighed. "I never get tired of this view. Your father wanted us to live down in the flats so he could walk to campus, but I insisted on a house in the hills. I told him: It's my money, damn it, and we'll live where I say. Besides, you can see the whole campus from up here. Practically spit and hit one of those professors on his pointy head. Where's my drink, Orrin?"

Behind her back, Orrin and Elena exchanged an uncertain glance. "About the book, Mother," said Elena. "Professor Paulo is so fascinating, really. You simply must read her book. It's not dry at all. At least read the chapter about Clytaemnestra. You're always reading those tawdry murder mysteries and awful true-crime books. Well, the Greek tragedies are full of murders. That's what they're all about. Lurid, shocking stuff."

"Yeah? Well, maybe — Jesus, look at this railing! What is this, termite damage? God, this thing would fall right through if you leaned on it." She peered over and whistled. "Quite a drop! Orrin—"

"He's gone to get your drink, Mother."

"Well, tell him to get a carpenter up to look at this. I don't want somebody falling off the deck and suing my ass. Not that there'd be much of a person left after a fall like that!"

"I don't see why you keep pressing her to read Professor Paulo's book," said Orrin. "It makes me nervous. Why should we tip her off beforehand?"

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"But don't you see, darling?" said Elena. "We're not just killing her to get our hands on the money, like a couple of greedy children. That would make us no better than common murderers. This is different. This is a revenge killing for what she did to Papa, sanctioned by the gods. And before she goes, I want her to understand that. I don't want her to simply die; I want her to know who's killing her and why, and that we're doing it without feeling the least shred of guilt."

Orrin furrowed his brow. "She *is* our mother . . ."

"Orrin, you saw what she did to Papa. When they married, she had all the money, and she kept it that way, to use it as a weapon against him. How many times did we see her humiliate him at cocktail parties — making a spectacle of herself, coming on to younger faculty members, ridiculing his work, practically emasculating him in front of his colleagues. You know that's why he never advanced in the department. Because of her! And then, when she started flaunting her gigolos — do you remember the time Papa came home and found her in bed with that boy? A student, for God's sake! An undergraduate! A part-time stud-for-hire who ran one of those horrible ads in one of those horrible newspapers —"

Orrin put his hand on her shoulder. She shuddered and drew away.

"Papa killed himself, Elena. Sleeping pills."

"Do you think that's how the gods would see it? Simple suicide? She drove him to it. The shrew, the slut. Just as surely as if she'd put a gun to his head. Oh, Papa . . ." Elena began to cry.

"Elena!" Orrin tried to hold her, but she wouldn't let him.

"That's why I want her to read Professor Paulo's book. At least the chapter on Clytaemnestra. The ideas are probably too sophisticated for her, but hopefully something of the truth will seep in, at some dim level. We could try to explain it to her ourselves, but I'm not sure I could manage to deliver a speech . . . when we do it. No, having her read the book is the right way. If it gives her a quiver of apprehension, good! Let her remember what she did to Papa. Let her sense that revenge is on its way. She won't know when, or how, but when it comes, she'll understand." Elena sniffled and dabbed her eyes. "I'm pretty sure she's reading the book. I saw it on her bedside table, with a bookmark in it."

On Sundays they always took a walk along one of the fire trails up in the hills — to work up an appetite, Maria said, because after-

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wards she always prepared a big dinner for the three of them. It was the only meal she made all week, and just about the only time she spent in the kitchen, other than to fix herself a drink. Otherwise Elena did the cooking, which was never quite good enough to satisfy her mother. "I used to be a damned good cook," Maria would brag, "which is why I still do it once a week, just to keep in practice. That's why your father married me, you know. For my cooking. Ha!"

The Sunday walks were like a bizarre parody of a wholesome family outing, Elena thought; she and Orrin hated them, but Maria always made them come along with her. "It's not safe for a woman my age to go walking in the hills alone," she had told them once, causing Elena to whisper to Orrin behind her back, "She wants us to go along to protect her? We'd do better to protect all those runners in skimpy nylon shorts from *her.*"

A rainstorm had swept through during the week, scrubbing the leaves of the oaks, shredding bark off the eucalyptus trees, and greening the ferns along the trail. Mushrooms of various hues and grotesque shapes had popped up among the splayed tree roots. The air was fresh and scented with eucalyptus. "Like breathing in a cough drop!" said Maria, striding ahead of them and filling her lungs. It was a line she'd used a thousand times before. Elena grimaced and made her hands into claws. Orrin frowned and shook his head.

"Why are you two hanging so far back? Catch up!"

Elena and Orrin looked at each other as they quickened their pace. The mutual glance assured them that they weren't just imagining it, because they'd both noticed it: Their mother was unusually jumpy today, as if she were nervous . . . or suspicious. She *had* been reading the book. On some level, the message about justified revenge must have gotten through to her.

A shirtless jogger passed by, a blond student-type with gazelle legs and a fleecy chest. Elena watched as her mother raked her eyes up and down the boy's body. The boy noticed, too. He smiled at Maria. Maria smiled back. Elena stabbed her jagged nails into her palms. She wanted to slap her mother. She wanted to scream!

But Maria's smile quickly faded, Elena noticed. Yes, her mother was uneasy, worried about something — as she had every reason to be. Orrin and Elena had made up their minds: This was to be the day.

An older couple passed by, a white-haired man swinging a walk-

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ing stick and a sweet-looking woman in purple holding his arm. Elena recognized them. They were Sunday morning regulars on the trail. Maria gave them a big, phony smile and said hello as they passed, and Elena felt another surge of anger. How dare a slut like her mother ingratiate herself to a respectable couple like that! They had probably been faithfully married for forty years and had children who loved them as much as they obviously loved each other. What a contrast to her mother — a woman who had driven her husband to suicide, made her children's lives a living hell, carried on shamelessly with a string of younger lovers . . .

"Elena! Do *not* go picking mushrooms! Only an expert can tell which ones are safe to eat."

Elena gave a start. She had become so engrossed in her thoughts that she'd wandered off the trail into the ferns. Now her mother was shouting at her, telling her not to pick mushrooms as if she were a stupid child. Elena had no intention of picking mushrooms. Why did her mother have to gratuitously insult her intelligence? Elena ground her teeth, then smiled. Had her mother become so paranoid that the sight of mushrooms made her think of poison? Good! There were only a few hours left for Maria to brood over her crimes, and then it would all be over—her father's untimely death would be avenged, her mother's wickedness would be undone, the universe would at last be put right again by a purifying act of justified revenge.

"So, Mother, I see you've been reading that book we gave you." Orrin put down his knife and fork and took a drink of water. His mother's roast beef with gravy was, as usual, prepared to perfection. She had always been a better cook than Elena.

"Yeah, I finished it. Not bad, actually." Maria kept her eyes on her plate. Her voice had a cold edge. Orrin and Elena looked at each other. "The writing was pretty pretentious, but stupid little me managed to follow it. From the way the two of you pushed it on me, anybody might think you were trying to send me a message with that book."

"Really, Mother?" Elena's voice trembled. Her eyes flashed.

"Yes, really, Elena," snapped Maria, the sharpness in her voice dulled by gin.

"What did you think of Professor Paulo's reflections on the Clytaemnestra story?" said Orrin. His pulse quickened. Would he really be able to go through with it? Yes, he thought, feeling a

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surge of righteousness in his veins, almost like a rush of physical heat.

"The woman who was murdered by her kids? A very, very sicko story."

"But I don't think that's how the ancient Greeks saw it, Mother," said Orrin. "As Professor Paulo points out, in their world-view, Clytaemnestra deserved her punishment. She had murdered her husband, after all."

"The jerk deserved it!" said Maria. "Ag-a-mem-non — there, is that close enough, Orrin? Going off and leaving her for ten years, not to mention sacrificing their daughter on an altar because some stupid priest said to. And then, when he finally did come home, he shows up on the doorstep with his new piece of fluff, Cassandra. And you wonder why Clytaemnestra went ballistic?"

Orrin gritted his teeth. He wouldn't have to put up with his mother's boorishness much longer. "But all those extenuating circumstances are dealt with in the plays, and dispensed with. Whatever Agamemnon's faults, Clytaemnestra owed him her loyalty as his wife. For her to murder him, under any circumstances, was absolutely wrong, totally unjustified."

Maria stared at her plate. "But it was okay for her kids to turn around and murder her? I'd think that murdering a husband isn't nearly as bad as murdering your own mother. Your own mother, for chrissakes!" Her voice rose to a shriek and she slammed her fist on the table. The silverware jumped. So did Elena and Orrin.

Orrin mopped his forehead with his napkin. Elena was sweating too, he noticed. This was going to be more unpleasant than they had anticipated.

"Do you want to know what I thought of the *kids* in that story?" said Maria. "Orestes, the creepy son who cuts mom's throat because 'Apollo-made-me-do-it!' And that sister of his! That crazy, sex-starved, loony-tunes Electra who keeps egging him on—"

"You're not seeing it the way the ancient Greeks would have," said Elena icily, through clenched teeth. "Their obligation to their dead father outweighed every other consideration. The offense against a father had to be put right, and the obligation fell to them. No one else could avenge Agamemnon."

"What about their obligation to their mother, for chrissakes? To the woman who bore them?"

"The obligation to the father came first," said Orrin. "Aeschylus is quite explicit, when he has Apollo say:

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'The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts.' "

"What a bunch of crap!" said Maria. "You and your ancient Greeks make me want to throw up!"

Orrin winced. He was beginning to feel rather nauseated himself. This was not going as smoothly as he'd hoped. His mother was not going to go out as gracefully as Clytaemnestra did when she saw the inevitable coming. Clytaemnestra gave a little speech and walked off the stage to let Orestes cut her throat. Real life was not working out quite like a Greek tragedy.

He glanced at his sister. She was looking pale. Poor Elena, thought Orrin. What had she been hoping for—that their mother would break down with a big confession of guilt, would admit her worthlessness, would beg them for pity?

Obviously, that wasn't going to happen. They would have to skip the catharsis and get right to the climax. Revenge was still revenge, whether Maria understood the justification for her own death or not.

He had gone over the simple mechanics of the act in his mind a thousand times. All they had to do was maneuver her onto the deck, against the rotted railing, then give her a shove and send her plummeting into the abyss. The deck was screened all around by eucalyptus trees; no one would see. How appropriate to have her die offstage, as it were, just like in a Greek play, where the acts of brutal violence were never witnessed by the audience.

They would say it was an accident, caused by his mother's drunkenness. She had hit the gin as soon as they got back from their walk, and her cocktail glass would be covered with her fingerprints. She drank, she staggered, she fell—it would look like a simple mishap. It would look like what it was: an act of the gods.

"I read the rest of that book too, you know," said Maria sulkily. "Clytaemnestra and her lousy kids I had no use for. But I liked the part about Medea."

"Medea?" said Elena huskily.

"Now there was a lady! You know the story?"

Elena hissed, "Of *course* we know it, Mother!"

"But maybe not the way I do. You see, there was this witch from a faraway land who had a lot of magical powers. Along comes Jason the Argonaut and sweeps her off her feet. He's young and

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good-looking, she's hot to trot, so like a jerk she gives up everything for him and moves back to his hometown, Corinth. Along the way she uses her magical powers to save his neck about a million times. But does the guy ever once say thank you? The bastard! And the minute they're back in Corinth, Jason starts looking for another wife. Because Medea's not beautiful enough? Because she doesn't love him enough, or can't give him children? No. Because when all's said and done, Jason's a cultured college boy from a good family, and Medea's a witch from the boonies, and all his hoity-toity friends laugh at her behind her back. She's a disgrace, an embarrassment. He can't take her anywhere! So he decides to trade her in for another model." Maria's voice broke and went up a register. "Is this sounding remotely familiar?"

Orrin and Elena stared at her dumbly. Their faces were chalk-white.

"Then let me tell you another version of the story, about a poor little rich girl from a podunk Oklahoma oil town whose family happened to have a pile of money but not much culture. Along comes a young, good-looking, would-be scientist California boy. He's there to do some fancy field research. Looking to get a golden fleece — or a sheepskin, anyway. If we substitute oil money for magical powers, does it start to make sense to you?

"He sweeps the Oklahoma girl off her feet and takes her back to California. But for such a big-brain, he can do some pretty stupid things. He keeps getting into bad scrapes, but his wife's magical powers always get him out of it. Is he ever thankful? Not this guy; he never heard of gratitude. And then there's that little problem about her not fitting in. He's the college boy, remember, and she's Medea, the witch from the boonies. An embarrassment. A cross to bear. Always holding him back. So the scientist starts shopping around for a new wife, meanwhile trying to figure out how he can get his hands on a big chunk of his old wife's magical money.

"But you can push a witch only so far. The Medea in the book knocked off the new wife, but let Jason live. The one from Oklahoma was a little more direct."

Orrin stared at her. He felt sicker and sicker. "Papa's death was a suicide. Technically, I mean. He died of an overdose of sleeping pills."

"That was my intention, to make it look like suicide. I guess I did a pretty good job."

Elena let out a loud, painful shriek.

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"The symptoms are kicking in sooner than I figured," said Maria softly. "God, I need another drink."

"Symptoms?" said Orrin, staring in horror at Elena across the table. She was doubling up in her chair, as if she felt the same stabbing cramps that he was starting to feel.

"From the mushrooms," said Maria. "In the gravy. You'll notice that I didn't take any. But I know how much you two love to slop it on everything — the roast beef and bread and potatoes. I don't think I can watch this." She got up from the table and went into the kitchen. Orrin and Elena were in no condition to follow.

Maria poured herself a very strong drink and thought about the rest of Medea's story. How she killed her own children, Jason's children, just to spite their no-good father. Well, in a way, maybe that's what she was doing now. Still spiting Jay, the no-good bastard who'd given her two no-good kids.

She looked blearily around the kitchen. Mustn't touch the spoon that had been used to stir the gravy, she reminded herself. Maria had made the gravy herself, of course, adding a very generous puréed helping of the mushrooms she'd gathered a few days ago. But she'd made a point of asking Elena to stir the gravy, then left the spoon in the saucepan with Elena's fingerprints on it, just in case the police doubted her when she told them that it was Elena who made the gravy.

And if they wanted to know who picked the mushrooms, Maria would tell them that Elena did — over Maria's very strenuous objections. Just ask that nice older couple they'd passed that morning on the fire road up in the hills, the ones Maria had made a point of smiling at and saying hello to. They'd surely overheard Maria warning Elena about picking mushrooms, and would remember. But Elena and Orrin were both so headstrong, they had insisted on putting the mushrooms into the gravy despite their mother's misgivings. She'd refused to touch it, but the children—

That would be her story. She would tell it to the doctors and the police with a catch in her throat and tears in her eyes, just as she'd done when she'd had to explain about Jay's overdose. This time, she had a feeling it wouldn't be all that difficult to make herself cry.

The sounds coming from the dining room were very unpleasant. Maria decided to make another drink and take it upstairs to her bedroom. Then she would take a very long, very hot shower. Even-

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tually, perhaps hours later, it would be time to switch the phones back on and call 911. The police would ask why she had waited so long, and she would tell them, weeping hot, guilty tears, that she had gotten drunk and fallen asleep, and when she finally woke up and went downstairs to the kitchen . . .

According to the book, after her children were dead and her vengeance was complete, the original Medea spirited herself by magic away from Corinth to live with a friendly king in Athens. Well, money was magic, and Maria had plenty of it. Perhaps she'd take a trip back to Oklahoma when all this was over. It had been years since she'd been home. Heaven knew she'd be needing a good long trip. Perhaps a vacation abroad . . .

Maria had never been to Greece. She wondered what the weather was like in Athens at this time of year. A handsome young Greek with an accommodating disposition — now that would be just the thing to help her put the terrible tragedy behind her. . . . ●

"Last week I yelled 'stop thief' and thirty-two people stopped."

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SHAPER'S END

by Catherine Morrell

HIP-WAIST TRIMMER

Function

To tone and tighten the waist region using gentle pressure against moving pads.

To free hip joints and exercise the lower back without strain or damage.

Instructions

Beginners: Lie on front with top of legs touching the pads. Support body on elbows, if possible. Apply gentle pressure as each pad goes down. Release as pad comes up. Legs move alternately.

Although this is her first published fiction, newcomer Catherine Morrell has a prior connection to the literary world by way of her unusual day job: She works for a collecting society that traces authors to pay them royalties they didn't know they'd earned! Ms. Morrell lives in the Garden of England, Kent, with her writer husband. She learned her craft in courses by the Avron Foundation in Devon (U.K.).

The second toning bed was torture. Debbie lay on her front, uncomfortably supported on her elbows and grimly concentrated on pushing one leg down as the other was hoisted back up. The background music didn't help: classical tunes arranged for palm-court orchestra and a three-fingered pianist. Her palms sweated, sticking to the imitation leather beneath them.

Today there was an added irritation: a pretty blonde. A pretty,

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skinny blonde. She made Debbie feel like a beached whale. What's more, the blonde talked constantly, mostly about her current man-friend. Debbie grudgingly admitted to herself it made a change from the usual chronicle of family and female complaints. Still, she'd disliked the interloper on sight.

"Sammy. I'm Sammy." She lay two beds ahead of Debbie on the circuit. "I'm here to tone up me bum a bit. He says it's a bit flabby."

Debbie could see nothing wrong with it and tried not to be envious. The other women present seemed spellbound by Sammy's candour.

"'Course, he's much older than me. And married."

"Aren't all the nice ones married?" said Karen, the attendant. She had arrived in response to a bleep: Someone's time was up.

"Seems so. His wife's a career woman. Doesn't have much time for him."

The bleeps on the other beds went off in quick succession and there was a general shuffle round. Karen left the room to make coffee for the woman who'd finished. A woman who left slowly and reluctantly, ears pricked.

Debbie was now face up and could see the blonde, if she bothered to lift her head.

A grey-haired woman of ample proportions, perched on the stomach and hip trimmer, kick-started the conversation again. "Do you think he'll leave her?"

Debbie lifted her head and saw the blonde simper. Fascinating. She'd never seen anyone do that before.

"Probably. I'll know soon. He's been offered a job abroad. His wife'll do her nut when she hears."

"But that doesn't mean he'll leave her, dear."

"Go on!" Sammy giggled. "He'd do anything for me. He got me a job when I asked. He buys me things." She rattled the bracelets on her wrist. "He's only a man. Give me time."

"God help him," laughed Debbie's neighbour.

Sammy expanded on what the lovers got up to. Debbie recognised most of it from a sex guide that had been all the rage. She'd bought her husband a copy for Christmas. It had made no discernible difference.

The bleeps started going off again. The local doctor's receptionist, a thin-faced woman feared by half the town, halted by Sammy's bed. Sammy was subjected to the full intimidation: arms crossed, chin jutting, and eyes glaring.

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"You're the bitch who broke up Dr. Smith's marriage."

Debbie gave Sammy a more appraising look. She'd heard on the grapevine about Smith and the holiday relief secretary. So this was the girl. Poor man. He hadn't had a chance.

"Why are you really here?" spat the receptionist.

Sammy looked bewildered. Debbie held her breath but the rest of the room wanted titillation, not analysis.

"Why are any of us here?" chimed in Bed 1, a housewife.

"Its destiny. We must shape our ends . . ." misquoted Bed 8, a teacher.

"Rough-hew them how we will . . ." continued Bed 3, a councillor's wife.

"You've met my Hugh, then?" laughed Bed 2, another housewife.

"Yes, talk about a bit of rough. . . ."

The banter had its effect and the receptionist was led away to her coffee by Karen.

The housewife on Bed 2 quickly reassured Sammy. "She's only jealous, dear. Probably fancied Smith herself. He is rather dishy." Bed 2 sounded wistful.

"I didn't want to come here. My bloke insisted." The ladies exchanged glances. "He's paying, too." Self-satisfaction glowed on Sammy's face. The cat not only with the cream but a plate of lobster to follow.

The other women relaxed, happily assured of further revelations. Debbie managed to tune Sammy out by concentrating on a report she had to write.

LEG TONER

Function

To tone and trim the entire leg. The smooth circular exercise movement is effective for the inner, outer, and frontal thigh—also the calves.

Instructions

Beginners: Lie on bed with bottom of spine near edge of pad, head on cushion, legs raised for stirrups.
Outer thighs: Place feet in stirrups. Attendant will adjust stirrups and straps so that feet are in line with knees. As feet are moved away in circular motion, push gently with

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heels. Relax as feet move towards you. Keep knees a hand's breadth apart.

Inner thighs: Move right to edge of pad. Attendant will lower stirrups and angle them outwards. Knees are spread wider with soles of feet turning inwards. As before, push away and relax on return.

The sixth toning bed was for inner and outer thighs. The feet were strapped into stirrups, placing the body in a rather suggestive position. It was hidden round a corner to lessen embarrassment, but several women preferred not to use it in mixed company. It had been noted with glee that Sammy related the most intimate details of her relationship from this position.

"Must remind her of something," was the general observation.

"I certainly do a lot of thinking from that position."

"Yeah. It's good for shopping lists."

"Eh?"

"The rhythm, ducky. One: butter, two: sugar, three: . . ."

"You get as far as three? Lucky girl."

At this particular session, Debbie occupied one of the prized positions beside Sammy. Totally by accident. When remarks were directed at her, she smiled politely and refused to be drawn in. She spent most of the session following a blameless conversation about runner beans. Near the end, and whilst being swung from side to side by the waist trimmer, she was jerked back to Sammy. The familiarity of certain intimate anatomical details under discussion struck home.

"His right one, that's normal. The other's all scrunched up and wrinkled. There's no hair on that side either and a long scar. Accident when he was a kiddie."

The leg trimmer and waist trimmer placed their users head to toe. Debbie raised her head and looked over at Sammy. Her eyes were closed but she was smiling.

"Does it affect his performance?" asked the woman on the upper-body toner, breathily.

"Nah. But it looks funny. 'Course, I can't laugh. No sense of humour, men. Not when they're in the nuddy. Not about their bits." She began to giggle. Debbie was devastated. No one but she had the right to laugh at those "bits."

Relief came in the shape of Karen to change Sammy's position. The stirrups were lowered and angled outwards. Sammy moved

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down the bed to accommodate this. Karen started the machine. Debbie watched. Sammy looked helpless and ridiculous with her legs splayed. Despite herself, Debbie remembered a joke about the invisible man and grinned. Then it hit her: This particular invisible man was her husband. Sammy could have stepped straight out of one of his "secret" porn videos. Which put a slant on things which needed careful thought.

That day, Debbie didn't stop for coffee but rushed away. There were things she had to attend to.

TUMMY TONER

Function

To put elasticity back into the abdominal muscles which act as a natural corset, getting rid of unsightly "tummy bulge."

Instructions

Beginners: Lie flat on your back with buttocks resting on edge of moving pad. Legs will be raised simultaneously up to 25 times a minute. Breathe in and push with feet as pad moves away, breathe out and relax as pad comes up.

Debbie chose her next appointment carefully. There was a suitable afternoon when bookings were light. She came early. Karen was drying cups and saucers in the coffee area and greeted her in surprise.

"Sorry I'm early, Karen, but I thought I'd pop in and get it over with. Will that be a problem?"

"No, madam. There's only yourself and one other before four P.M."

Debbie glanced apprehensively at the appointments diary. It was Sammy. Relief flooded over her.

"We've had several cancellations. Most peculiar."

"Really?"

"Yes. They were all new clients. Coming in for their free trials."

Debbie was pleased, she hadn't realized she knew so many accents. "How strange."

When Sammy arrived, Debbie was well ahead on the circuit. The blonde looked put-out at the lack of other clients, but his didn't inhibit her. She seemed oblivious to Debbie's lack of response. How

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could her audience help being all ears? The monologue hardly stopped.

Eventually, Debbie was treated to details of a rendezvous in a restaurant she'd never liked.

"That's very interesting," she said.

Sammy seemed amazed to get a reaction. "Why's that?"

"My husband used to take me there."

"Great, ain't it? Like you're the only ones in the place. That's them booth things. Shuts you in. Real cosy. Candlelight. Music. Lovely." She sighed.

"Yes. But it's notorious as somewhere men take their bits on the side. It got too embarrassing for me."

Debbie changed beds. This one, as a trusted client, she was allowed to operate herself. Sammy had another couple of minutes to go on hers.

"Barry does that," Debbie continued when settled.

"What?" The blonde had turned extremely pale. Debbie found that gratifying. She was enjoying the role of bitch.

"My husband. Barry. Takes his current mistress there." Debbie decided to embroider. "Must have been number three before I cottoned on. No use making a fuss. I just let him get on with it. Keep my dignity."

Sammy was silent for a while. "My feller says he's never been unfaithful before."

"And you believed him?" Debbie shrieked with laughter. "My dear, they all say that. My Barry's had one little scrubber after another. The arrogant bastard even sat me at the same table as one of them, golf club dinner before last. Good luck to him. Gives me more time for my outside interests." Debbie smiled mysteriously.

"You don't mean . . ."

"Sauce for the goose, as they say."

The bleep interrupted them.

Sammy moved into the stirrups and was strapped in firmly. Debbie watched idly as the timer was started on the inner thigh exercise. The girl closed her eyes and concentrated on pushing out with her heels. For once there were no revelations about her lover's prowess in the bedroom.

Karen turned to Debbie. She was on the penultimate bed, which mimicked a rowing machine, but much gentler.

"When you've finished, give yourself a wobble." This referred to the final bed. "Okay, Mrs. Mountfield?"

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"Mrs. Mountfield?" Sammy seemed relieved.

"That's what she calls me. I'm a doctor, really." Debbie smiled and gave herself to her bed's manipulation. She could never have foreseen that particular advantage of keeping her maiden name. Time passed.

Karen arrived to adjust Sammy to the outer thigh position, her legs angled outwards and her bottom jammed up against the end of the bed.

"You nearly finished, Mrs. Mountfield?"

"Yes, thanks. I'll have a wobble in a moment."

"Coffee or tea?"

"Tea, please. Do you have any rosehip?"

"No. I'm out of it."

"What a pity. I really fancy it. Trust me to ask for the one thing you've not got." Debbie smiled encouragingly. She was a good customer and Karen was eager to please.

"I'll pop over to the shop and get some."

"If it's not too much trouble. I can get Sammy out of the stirrups if you're not back in time."

Karen waved her thanks and sped away. Debbie's bed bleeped its end of cycle and she moved on, to the final bed.

CIRCULATOR—ROWER

Function

To ease tension and stress by a gentle massaging motion and promote a feeling of well-being.

Instructions

Lie flat on back. Place head on pillow. Completely relax.

Safety Note

You may feel dizzy or lightheaded when getting off the bed due to the increased blood flow. To avoid this, sit up slowly and pause before standing.

The "circulator," its official name, was never used. Its action shook the body gently and, in all but a lucky few, the flesh wobbled like jelly. There was a pleasant background drone as it did so. It was most relaxing.

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Debbie set the timer for five minutes but, two minutes in, she sat up slowly and paused before standing.

"Barry." The blonde's eyes flew open. Debbie was crouched beside her. She spoke into the perfect pink ear. "It's my Barry." Fear flared in the blonde's eyes. "Don't deny it. I've followed you."

The blonde found her tongue. "Whatever turns you on."

"It's what turns you on, or rather him, that matters here."

"You don't, that's for sure."

"Don't be so cocky. What man could resist his fantasy made flesh?"

"Yours didn't."

"True. You know, I'd never have known but for your big mouth. And Barry's stupidity. Wanting the buzz from knowing we were together." She sighed. "Silly man. He wasn't to know how women talk. That his physical peculiarity would be broadcast round most of the town."

"So what'll you do about it?"

"That's caused me a lot of heart-searching. If it'd been anyone else but you . . . A colleague, a woman of intelligence, a successful woman . . . I might have accepted that. Would have got a lot of sympathy. But you, you've degraded our marriage. As though sex was the only important part."

Debbie rose from her crouch. "I'm not a G.P., by the way." She took a glass container from her sweatshirt pocket.

"I work in a laboratory." Debbie's hands came into Sammy's view. They were clothed in thin plastic gloves. Fear returned to Sammy's eyes. She struggled to remove her feet from the restraining straps. Too late. Debbie opened the container with a snap. Sammy breathed deeply to scream and took in a lung-full of ether from the impregnated pad pressed firmly over nose and mouth. Out she went.

Debbie moved quickly. She returned the pad to its container. She stopped the toning machine and unstrapped Sammy's feet from the stirrups. One arm under the head and one under the knees and she swung the unconscious girl onto the next bed. Adrenaline gave her strength and agility. She arranged the legs and turned back to the vacated toning bed, making sure there were no telltale signs of a struggle.

Debbie turned round and looked down at her victim.

"Well, my dear. Didn't you choose the wrong marriage to meddle with?" She took a small hypodermic syringe with a long needle out of her pocket. "My lab is a medical one. It does drug assays for the police." She pulled down the girl's leggings and knickers, expertly

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selecting the femoral vein. "It won't be noticed there at first." She laughed. "Or at second."

She injected the solution. "Pity you won't appreciate this. Pure heroin. The purest my lab's ever seen. Dangerous stuff." She quickly rearranged the clothing and placed the syringe in her pocket. She started the bed, which swung to and fro, trimming a waist that had never needed and would never need it. Then she removed the plastic gloves.

WARNING

To do any exercise not approved by the attendant is dangerous. Do not alter the controls, especially the timing. Your level will be continuously assessed and adjustments made accordingly.

When Karen came back from the shop, Debbie was changed and sitting in the waiting room.

"Sorry I took so long, Mrs. Mountfield. The queue was enormous and they only had one till open!"

"Doesn't matter. I've started the girl on the next bed."

"Good. Time to make the tea."

Between the tea and chatting to Debbie, Karen was distracted for quite a time. Debbie listened with half an ear for the termination bleep. She didn't want the accommodating Karen traumatised by finding the body.

As luck would have it, Karen's mother phoned. The conversation promised to last ages. Debbie refreshed her cup and sipped for a moment. Then she rose, caught the other woman's eye and mimed that she would deal with the toning room. After a moment she returned. As soon as Karen's call was over, Debbie took the phone.

"I'm afraid there's something wrong." She put one hand on Karen's shoulder to prevent her from rising and dialled.

"Police and an ambulance. There's been a death." Karen gasped. "The toning and fitness salon, 88 The High Street, next to the chemist's." She waited whilst the dispatcher relayed the information. "The death seems natural, but I won't know till I've opened her up." Debbie smiled grimly at the squawk from the phone.

"This is Dr. Deborah Mountfield. Senior pathologist."●

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Death Song

by Robert Campbell

She would not tell her native name. The hospital in Juneau admitted her under the name by which she was known, Louise Nelligan, the name on her insurance card.

She had been born in 1900 at the very moment when the new century began. When mention was made of that, people made a good deal of fuss, claiming that as a child of the new century she had special powers of magic and divination. Since her people, the Tlingit, did not mark the passage of time according to the Gregorian calendar, she said it was all a lot of bunk.

Ten years ago Robert Campbell began a mystery series whose first entry won the 1986 Edgar Award for best paperback original novel. In the intervening years he has produced six more books in the series (which features Chicago ward boss Jimmy Flaherty) plus a number of novels set in L.A. If Mr. Campbell's short fiction whets your appetite for more of his evocative mysteries, see *A Lion's Slave* (Mysterious Press). †

At ninety-five, the frailties and devastations of age, but not the confusions, were finally catching up with her. She'd been off the fishing boats that sailed out of Wrangel for fifteen years but that hadn't meant she couldn't or didn't put in a hard six days a week, doing the cooking and the washing for herself, keeping her tiny house spick-and-span.

She'd been alone for thirty-two years, ever since she'd strewn red bark wreaths and sage blossoms on the waters where her husband, Donny, had fallen off a boat and disappeared in a storm back in '63; dead at seventy.

They'd had no children.

She was not afraid of solitude.

She never looked into a mirror; washed her face and combed her

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hair in the softly distorted reflection of herself in the rain barrel. In that way she remained in her youth, strong in the hope that she might still retrieve her lost innocence and restore her soul.

When fifteen years old, she had been brutally raped by the man who had been the agent for Indian Affairs.

No charges had been filed, no punishment exacted, and no retribution made.

The man, Henry Xavier Warner, had merely been transferred to another reservation in the lower forty-eight. Somewhere in the Southwest, among the Navaho and Hopi, some said.

Had he been punished, had her dishonor been avenged, it would have been as though the assault had never happened. It was the way among them. Without redress she lived on with the shame; refusing to run and seek anonymity elsewhere, away from her moiety, clan, and house. But she would not answer to her Tlingit name, insisting on using the name she'd been given by the government registrar of births.

She'd spoken of her ordeal in great detail only once, on the eve of her wedding day, for she felt she owed her husband-to-be, a stranger from another place and clan, that truth. Owed him the opportunity to withdraw his proposal if he chose to do so, reluctant to take to wife a dishonored woman.

The years had passed one by one, marked by the seasons and the run of tides. Five years a single woman, though not a maiden. Forty-three years married. Thirty-two years widowed. Eighty years living with a stone beneath her heart. It should not have mattered anymore, her stolen innocence, but it did, even now, at her great age, in this hospital that would be her dying place.

She was bitterly amused by the observation that even the bigoted treated the very young and the very old of a despised race with affection for the one and deference to the other.

She thought the staff and visitors foolish, but allowed them to fuss over her, to hold her hand and coo into her face, to express their astonishment over someone who had lived so long, sometimes to ask her to tell their fortunes, for it was also believed that old native women, particularly one who celebrated her birthday along with a century, had exceptional powers of prophesy.

She had a lovely sly sense of humor and insulted all the white faces with promises of bad fortune and assorted disasters which sounded to them like promises of good luck and desirable gifts.

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The night-shift nurse understood her jokes better than most, perhaps because she was one-eighth native, her great-grandmother having been a Tlingit and her great-grandfather an English sailor; a little native sometimes going a long way if the person had the heart and spirit for it.

"You were very naughty to Mrs. Pritchard," Margaret scolded. "She contributes a great deal to the hospital."

"If she can afford to give so much, then she should be satisfied and not beg for more good news," Louise replied.

"Well, she might not be bothering you so much anymore."

She waited for Louise to ask what was meant, but should have known better. Louise wouldn't ask, knowing that a white person with a secret was like a fish with a badly placed hook in its mouth; they'd spit it out sooner or later.

"We've just had a new admission to the ward," Margaret said. "A man who'll be having his hundredth birthday in just a week. The local television station is going to send a camera crew. He's to be interviewed by some hostess from one of the network affiliates in Seattle. It'll be shown across America."

"So it's a case of a greater fool pushing a lesser fool out of the way, is that it?" Louise asked.

"Well, you can understand," Margaret said, teasing the old woman, believing that Louise really enjoyed being the center of so much attention, not understanding that every remark about her great age diminished Louise's image of the young soul that could still be saved.

"I doubt if any of you can," Louise replied. "Dying's not an easy thing to do. Poor man, what does he care about being a hundred? He would much rather be twenty. I can tell you, he'd be happier if you'd all just go away and let him sing his death song."

"Mr. Warner's an Anglo," Margaret said. "They don't have death songs."

"Who? What name?" Louise asked sharply.

"Warner. Henry Warner. Don't tell me you know him?"

"Has he got a middle name?"

"I don't know."

"It'd be on his admittance slip, wouldn't it?"

"It might be."

"Would you look it up?"

Margaret hesitated. Giving out information about one patient to another might not be the right thing to do, Margaret might have

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said to someone else, but Louise was ninety-five and Mr. Warner's names, as many as he might have, would soon be common knowledge, broadcast far and wide in his obituary.

"Would you do that for me, please?" Louise asked.

"All right, all right," Margaret said soothingly, patting Louise's hand, a little concerned by her patient's agitation, hurrying away to look up Mr. Warner's admission form and coming back within minutes to tell Louise that the centenarian's full name was Henry Xavier Warner.

Louise sighed and settled back into her pillows.

Later, Margaret would remember the curious look of contentment that illuminated Louise's face, as though a gift, long withheld or thought unattainable, had wondrously been given her.

There was a great deal of disappointment when Henry Xavier Warner was found dead at three o'clock the very next morning, six days short of the anticipated centenary celebration.

When a man dies six days short of a hundred years, no one looks for special causes, but it's only natural to speculate about what might have been done to nurse out the extra days so that such a singular celebration day might have been attained; only natural for anyone associated with the circumstances to think about where they might have been when ancient Henry Xavier Warner breathed his last.

The attending physician, young Dr. Farrow, for instance, couldn't explain and didn't mention the stricture of what he could only describe as terror which had distorted the old man's face.

And Margaret couldn't be absolutely certain about and didn't mention the soft keening chant, as of a rising wind, which she thought she heard in the darkest hour of the morning.

As soon as she was able, she went to look in on Louise, afraid that the news may have already reached her by word of mouth, as such news will do.

The old woman was in bed, propped up by pillows, her hair in braids, glossy as though freshly oiled. There was color in her cheeks and lips.

"Are you feeling all right, Louise?" Margaret asked.

"My name is Kooteen and I am fifteen years old."

That is all.

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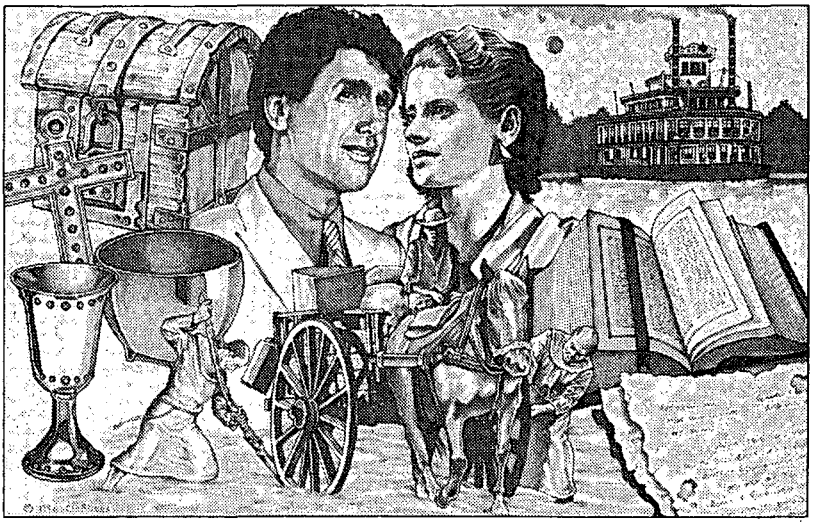

Art by Ron Chironna

CHRIST'S TEARS

by Kate Wilhelm

1.

"April Fool's Day," Charlie said, ripping March from the kitchen calendar with some enthusiasm. Rain, snow, wind, summery days alternating with ice storms too fast to fathom, March was a good month to be done with. "April Fool's Day," he repeated with a grin. "Wonder why that seems so appropriate."

Constance made a snorting sound, a wordless comment he had no problem interpreting. For people who had been married as long as they had been, words could be superfluous. He chuckled. On Thursday a priest he knew from the city had called to introduce someone else by phone. Someone Else had at first demanded, then pleaded for an immediate meeting in Manhattan. Saturday, Charlie had said, and at his home in upstate New York. That was the whole point in being retired; you did things your way or skipped them. He knew the difference; he had put in years working for the

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city of New York, first as an arson investigator, then as a detective. Constance, a psychologist, had retired at the same time he did. Now people came to them. Or not.

"All right," Someone Else had said. "That will give you time to check us out. I'll bring two others."

After hanging up, Charlie had gone straight to his computer and checked them out, and had returned bemused. John Webber, alias Someone Else, was a high muckety-muck in the Catholic church, right hand of God maybe. Carlos Villanueve Ortiz was a high muckety-muck in the Mexican embassy. And Willy Bols was an ex-con. April Fool's Day.

When the group arrived at ten, a fourth person was present: a young woman on stilts, was Charlie's first impression, watching them approach from the driveway. But she simply had very high heels, very long legs, a very short skirt, and a lot of improbable red hair out every which way. Charlie could see a new Toyota parked behind a Continental in the driveway.

Bols was easy to pick out: slightly built, furtive, keeping his distance from the other two men. The Mexican was easy too: not very tall, almost rigidly erect, with a mass of black hair, nattily dressed in a gray three-piece suit, spit-polished shoes. Typecasting, Charlie thought derisively. Webber, in a sports coat and slacks, could have been the corner grocer, a druggist, a high-school teacher. He was tall and wide, with wind-tossed blond hair a touch too long, which was interesting since no wind was evident. He had played center for Notre Dame.

In recent years Kate Wilhelm's fictional investigators Charlie and Constance Meiklejohn have had their feet firmly planted in the mystery genre, but that wasn't always the case. *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* published several fantasy crime cases involving the married couple in the 1980s, and a selection of the best of their adventures both criminous and fantastical are now collected in a volume just published by St. Martin's Press entitled *A Flush of Shadows*. The present outing for the pair is pure fun—a genuine treasure hunt!

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Charlie went to the door to admit them. Constance followed to help with coats, and the introductions were made in the foyer. The woman was Noreen Raditch; she had a Brooklyn accent. Then, in the living room, Charlie watched them sort themselves out: Willy Bols and Noreen Raditch on the love seat, as close together as two people could get without surgery; Ortiz and Webber on opposite sides of the room, as far from one another as the room allowed. He took his Morris chair, and Constance her usual wing chair, and he said, "So, tell me. What do you want?"

"We wish to engage you to pursue a matter of great delicacy . . ." Ortiz. Born and raised in the States, a Princeton education, he had not even a trace of accent.

"Your name was suggested; your reputation for discretion was looked into, and your past achievements . . ." Webber. Roughneck kid, rough Chicago neighborhood, the Church. His accent would never desert him.

"We need you to find something. . . ." Bols had not quite squeaked through high school. *Neeja, finsumpn* . . . The Bronx all the way.

"Mr. Webber," Charlie said, "since you called, why don't you lay it out for me?" Webber was a priest who had advanced by way of the office of antiquities acquisitions, but he'd be damned if he'd say Father to a man ten years younger than he was.

"Yes," Webber said. "We should follow the original plan," he added, frowning at Ortiz.

"Your plan. Always your plan."

Charlie began to tap his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Mr. Webber, if you will," he said firmly.

"Our plan was to let Mr. Bols tell his story first, and then fill in our roles. It began with him."

Charlie turned his gaze to Willy Bols, who was looking more and more uncomfortable. Noreen's white-knuckled grip on his arm would leave bruises, he thought, waiting.

"Yeah," Bols said. "Yeah. See, I was working in the infirmary up at Attica, and there was this real old guy dying in there. One day he wanted me to look in a box for some pictures, and I found a Bible. And I says, Hey, Ed, you never told me you could read Spanish, and he says he can't. They sent it to him when his pa died. He never even opened it, didn't even know it was a Spanish Bible. He was in for life," Willy added somberly. "Anyway, I'm looking for the pictures and moving stuff around, and this enve-

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lope falls out of the Bible, and I say, Hey, Ed, your pa must have wrote you a letter, and you never even opened that neither. And he gets all excited. He's little, like a dried-up monkey, and he's crying and blubbering for me to read it to him. So I open the envelope and there's two letters, one of them in English and one in Spanish."

Willy shifted repeatedly on the love seat, his gaze darting about the room. He kept fingering the buttons on his shirt. "Okay, the letters. See, they were both old, real old, and they'd been through a lot. Most of the writing was gone, the papers stuck together like they'd got wet and sort of glued together when they dried again. It wasn't no letter from his pa," he said. "It was real fancy, full of stuff like your holiness, blessed mother of God, stuff like that. And poor old Ed, he's crying, and he begins to talk about this thing that happened when he was a little kid. He forgot about it until I read him that letter, and he doesn't remember it too good, a little bit at a time, for the next couple of weeks . . ."

The year was 1904. Abe Worsham had lost his wife and two children to a pestilence ravaging the South. He took Ed, his surviving son, and an old draft horse and cart, and headed north to look for work. Somewhere along the way, he was hired by a group that included two men in black dresses and three Indians, with a lot more gear than they could carry. They loaded up stuff on the wagon and continued. One Indian died the first night, and they buried him. The other two were nearly dead, but they held on for another day, got too sick to move, then died. They buried them and most of the gear; now the priests were also ill and had to ride. The American priest died next, and there was only the Spanish-speaking priest left, a raving maniac. The American had written a letter and paid Abe to mail it for him in the first town they came to. Now the Spanish-speaking priest wrote another letter, added it to the first one, and sealed the envelope. When he died, Abe buried him, and he and his son went on their way. He never mailed the letters.

Willy had kept the Spanish letter, hoping to find someone he could trust to read it for him, but after Ed Worsham finally died, he forgot about it.

"So I get out back in ninety, and me and Noreen get together again, and that letter sits in my junk until two years ago when she finds it and gets all hot and bothered, thinking some woman's been writing to me and I never even mention it."

"What I thought was, it should be read," Noreen said bitingly.

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"Yeah, right, and you blab it all over the place, and next thing I know these dudes are climbing my back," he said aggrievedly, motioning toward Ortiz and Webber.

"I asked a *priest* how to find out something about two other *priests,* for crying out loud! A priest! If you can't trust a priest, then who? And I asked a Spanish high-school teacher to read it for me. A teacher! I knew the dude from way back, and he goes straight to him!" She nodded toward Ortiz. "A spy, that's what he is, a spic spy!"

Ortiz and Webber both had followed Willy's narration with fierce concentration, as if they never had heard the story before, or they hoped he would add a new tidbit this time. "How did you both find your way to him?" Charlie asked.

Ortiz spoke first. "She gave the letter to an acquaintance of mine, pure happenstance. The teacher knows I am interested in antiquities, and he sent me a copy, since the letter was obviously quite old," he said smoothly.

Charlie nodded and turned to Webber. "And the priest she talked to happened to be your acquaintance?"

"Not at all. But he searched a data base for whatever information he could find concerning those two priests, and that alerted my office. Accordingly, I went to talk to him, and here we are."

Charlie nodded again. "It's an interesting little bit of Americana, but why are you here?"

Webber smiled slightly. "You know the parable about the blind men and the elephant? One thought it was a wall, one a rope, and so on. We're those blind men, and we've come to you because you're sighted. We each know things, but not enough, and obviously no one is willing to divulge everything to either of the others for fear that one will rush to the graves. I'm afraid Willy knows a great deal more than he has revealed, enough to send him off on his own private expedition to search. Fruitlessly, I might add. We've had many discussions, and finally hit upon the notion that an outsider, someone trustworthy and intelligent, with proper investigative training, might be able to configure the elephant for us."

"Knock off the bull about elephants!" Noreen cried. "Look, it's simple. Everybody tells you everything they know, like in private, and you figure out where the treasure's at. Okay?"

"But why me?" Charlie asked again, ignoring Noreen. "I never heard of any of you."

"We all submitted names, many names," Ortiz said with a little

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sigh. "On investigation, none of those suggested seemed appropriate. Then Willy mentioned your name. We investigated. No one has any objection to hiring you."

For several seconds Charlie had been aware that Constance had been trying to get his attention. When he glanced at her, she was watching Willy Bols intently. He didn't even sigh.

"Why are you so nervous, Mr. Bols?" Constance asked then. Charlie leaned back, waiting.

"Me? Well, hey, if they know everything in my head, they don't need me no more. Right?"

"Well, that seems cause enough," she said slowly. "Charlie, let's ask Mr. Bols to step into the other room for a moment." She stood up and started to walk from the living room.

Ortiz leaped to his feet; Charlie waved him down again. "You gentlemen can amuse each other." Willy Bols had drawn back into the love seat as far as he could; he looked miserable. "Well, come on," Charlie said.

Noreen and Willy exchanged glances, then she began to rise. "Me, too," she said. "Come on, Willy."

Charlie ushered them towards the den. At the door Constance mouthed to him: "Wired."

In the den was the television, a red leather-covered couch, three comfortable chairs, an old, banged-up desk where they kept household accounts, bookshelves . . . Every window had potted plants on the sill, hanging from the ceiling nearby, or on the floor before it.

Charlie stood at the door and said to Willy, "Strip."

Willy and Noreen were in the center of the room. "What?" Willy cried. "What?"

"Strip, or beat it."

"They know," Noreen said nervously.

"Shut up!" Willy yanked off his sports coat and began to tear at the buttons on his shirt. No one spoke again as he opened his shirt to expose a tape recorder taped to his stomach. Gingerly he began to pull at the tape. With a scowl Noreen reached over and yanked it off. He moaned with his eyes closed.

Charlie took the tape recorder and pulled the wire loose, then put the small gadget on the floor and stepped on it. He picked up the crushed pieces and handed them back to Willy. "The microphone?"

Without a word Willy ripped a button off his shirt and handed it to Charlie.

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"Who put it there?" Charlie asked.

Willy shook his head. "I can't tell you that," he whined. "He'd kill me."

Constance put her hand on Charlie's arm. "Are we going to take this on?"

"Nope. Out of our line."

She studied him intently for a moment, then shook her head. "We are. Let's go hear the rest of the story."

When they returned to the living room, Ortiz jumped to his feet again; then, belatedly, Webber stood up. Constance motioned them down and Charlie said, "Just give it to me as straight as you can, guys. What's buried in that grave?"

"You need a little background—" Webber began.

Ortiz said quickly, "Many artifacts, many of them property of the Mexican government, the Mexican people."

"They are the property of the Roman Catholic Church," Webber said coldly. "Mr. Meiklejohn, please ask Carlos not to interrupt so that we can discuss this matter in a civilized way."

"Robbers, scavengers, worshippers of death . . ." Ortiz muttered. "Let him talk, then I'll tell the true story."

"You first," Charlie said to Webber, his patience near the limit. "The short version."

"Around the turn of the century there was great turmoil in this hemisphere, as you know. Mexico was in revolution; there was the Spanish-American War—" He looked to the ceiling beseechingly when Charlie scowled at him. "All right, I have written material for you to read. In Mexico, the Church was increasingly nervous about the security of many precious items. Religious items. The decision was made at the highest levels that many of the items were to be packed up and shipped to Rome for safekeeping."

Ortiz made a deep snarly sound. Webber continued without pause.

"Some items were shipped through the Gulf of Mexico to Cuba and on from there, but that became unfeasible, and this particular dispatch was shipped to New Orleans, to be transferred to a steamboat that would take it up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, and from there by train, and so on. However, the material did not arrive at St. Louis, and now, after ninety years, we have a clue about what happened to it. Clearly, it belongs to the Church."

"Pah!" Ortiz exclaimed. "The items, many of them, are pre-Columbian, priceless art of the Aztecs, the Mayas. They were confiscated, stolen, spoils of conquest. My government demands that

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that which is ours be restored to our people; this is our culture, our heritage, not booty of war. To him, to his Church, they are merely trifles; to us they represent the soul of our people."

"Right," Charlie said. "Gotcha. Okay, you said you each know something the others don't know. What next? You tell us what those little extras are, and let us puzzle it out? Is that the plan?"

"Exactly," Webber said.

Ortiz nodded.

"But then what?" Constance asked. "What if we actually can puzzle it out? You draw swords and fight over who gets what? Pistols at dawn?"

In the silence that ensued, Willy Bols studied his shoes; Noreen worked on her cuticles. Webber frowned thoughtfully at the ceiling, and Ortiz leaned back with his eyes closed. Charlie winked at Constance, and neither of them made a sound.

At last Ortiz murmured, "We have made arrangements with Willy. He has been compensated for his cooperation, and is due a second payment when he confides in you. John and I have agreed to share the expenses of your investigation, and to pay you a reasonable finder's fee. As for the rest, we will make accommodations between ourselves." He did not open his eyes; he sounded almost dreamy.

"Not good enough," Charlie said. "We'll need to know what those accommodations are, when to put on the bullet-proof vests, when to start ducking, all that kind of messy stuff."

"For now, let's just get at it," Webber said. "If it appears that you're actually on the track, then we'll huddle and come up with a workable plan. We decided fifty thousand would be a reasonable finder's fee, by the way."

Charlie shook his head. "Fifty now, another fifty if we find anything. All expenses paid weekly."

Ortiz sat up straight with his eyes open.

In a pained voice Webber said, "We'll have to talk this over."

"And this, too," Charlie said easily. "Since you both have devoted flunkies and I don't, if I say I need this or that, you get it. No questions asked. If some of our expenses aren't explained, no questions about that, either, since I don't tell anyone anything until we know exactly what you plan."

"No progress reports?" Webber demanded. "Come on, Meiklejohn, you know better than that."

"No specific progress reports," Charlie said.

There was another silence, this time a very glum silence.

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Finally Webber said, "What else?"

"We'll want a contract, and the first payment; then we talk to you one at a time until we have all your little secrets. We'll go on from there."

After a moment Webber sighed. "We should break up this meeting at this point. Carlos, will you be my guest for lunch? We can talk, and return here at two. Is that agreeable?"

"My pleasure," Ortiz said. "We must discuss all this," he said almost apologetically to Charlie.

"Fine," Charlie said. "We'll be here."

As soon as they were all gone, he turned to Constance and laughed. "My God, we're going on a treasure hunt!"

2.

Over lunch Constance asked, "You don't really believe we'll be able to find anything, do you?"

"Nope. That's why the fifty grand up front. We'll put in the time, do the work, and end up richer than we are now, with corpses, or what's left of them, undisturbed in their graves, the priceless treasure still safe in the arms of Mother Earth. How about you?"

"Same," she said. "They've had the leads for two years. They must have tried everything — metal detectors, low-flying planes, infrared devices. . . . Willy thought he knew where to look. . . ."

"And Willy has an angel," Charlie added when she trailed off and finished her salad. "We go after him first. Okay?"

She nodded. Obviously Willy was first. Her eyes were narrowed in thought as they both ate. Finally she said, "Charlie, after this is over, let's use some of the money for a cruise."

He groaned. He did not like big boats, speedboats, rowboats, any kind of boat. People were not supposed to go out on the ocean. If something went wrong, then what? You couldn't run away from it. He had seen the movies, the paintings, had read the stories. He knew about the *Titanic;* that's what came of going out on the ocean in a boat. Everyone knew steel did not float, at least not very long. Just looking at a Turner seascape made him seasick.

"We'll talk about it later," Constance said, her voice low-key, easy, but with a look in her eyes that made him uncomfortable.

Later, after putting two checks in the wall safe, along with a signed contract, leaving Webber and Ortiz in the living room glowering at one another, they escorted Willy and Noreen back to the den and started.

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"Okay," Charlie said when they were all seated. "You know the rules. No stonewalling, no evasions, no beating around the bush. Who else did you tell your story to?"

Willy shifted uncomfortably. "This rich guy, DeWilde's his name. See, those two dudes come running around asking questions, and I seen this was big, then they go away and don't tell me nothing. I try calling and get the cold shoulder. Then I seen a story about this DeWilde guy, he paid a couple of million for some old picture, and I think, maybe he'd be interested. But he wasn't," he added.

"Who else?"

Willy glanced at Noreen and then out the window. "That's it," he mumbled.

Charlie shook his head. "Forget the rules already? No lying, that's one. Who wired you?"

Willy began to crack his knuckles. "I can't tell you. I mean, it's my ass here. He'd have me put out like a candle. If that messes up the deal, that's the way it's gotta be."

"What we really want to know," Constance said easily, "is the rest of your story. I suppose your other friend doesn't know any more than you do, but does he know more than we do? Let's treat your sketch as an outline and start filling in details."

Willy nodded gratefully. Charlie leaned back in his chair and let her start digging.

What had first attracted Abe Worsham's attention was the sight of a large trunk floating down the river, sinking lower and lower until it was gone. He and the boy had set out on foot to see what was happening, if there was anything more than the trunk, and they spotted the priests and three Indians tying up a very big bundle, as big as a man. They had wrapped up whatever had been in the trunk and some of the crates, which were strewn about, empty. They dragged the big bundle and a couple of small boxes back a ways; then they made a fire with the empty crates just when it was getting dark.

The next day Abe watched again. They had dragged the stuff less than a quarter of a mile away from the river, and they were all exhausted. He approached them and was hired.

"It's like I said before after that," Willy said then. "They began dying. When they buried the two Indians, they dug one of the graves real deep, and they hauled the big bundle to it and buried it first, the Indian on top of it. He, Ed, was just a little kid, remember, and he was scared to death of those guys. Especially

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the priests. He said they put a curse on the grave so no one would bother it. He said they couldn't move the big bundle and they had to use the horse to drag it to the grave. He remembered that.

"When the first priest died, they buried a closed box and put him in on top of it," Willy continued. "The other priest was crying; that's what Ed remembered best. Then a day, two days, he didn't know when it was, the last one bit it, and Abe buried him alone. Him and Ed kept going. There was one last box of junk and they dumped it."

"Where were they heading?" Constance asked.

"Paducah," Willy said, after a brief pause. "Ed said him and his pa sold the horse and wagon, got on a boat at Paducah, and went up the river."

Charlie's knowledge of the geography of that part of the country was too slight to register. Later, he decided, he would get out a map and have a look. For now, he was content to listen.

"What was in the letter you read to Ed Worsham?" Constance asked.

"Hey! That was ten, eleven years ago! I can't remember that stuff."

"Of course you can," she said reassuringly. "I'll help you." She smiled at him. "First, you make yourself as comfortable as you can; put your head back and close your eyes so that nothing in the room here will distract you. What you do is start at the beginning of the day you saw the letter. You woke up . . ."

This was going to take awhile, Charlie knew. Willy was fidgety and suspicious, certain there was nothing to remember. On the other hand, Charlie had seen Constance at work; her patience was greater than Willy's resistance.

After a few minutes, he stood up. "Doorbell," he said. "Carry on. I'll get it." Actually he was grateful for an excuse to leave. She had Willy at Ed's bedside now; he was still fighting her. Charlie left them.

In the living room Carlos Ortiz and John Webber were both at the front window peering out. Ortiz was livid, Webber flushed and angry. Charlie walked past them to the foyer and the door.

"Mr. Meiklejohn? Montgomery DeWilde, how do you do."

"Come in, Mr. DeWilde. Join the party."

DeWilde was wearing comfortable-looking chinos and a windbreaker, running shoes; he had parked a dazzling red MG in the driveway. He was a tall, slender man of fifty or so, with dark wavy hair, dark blue eyes. He looked amused.

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"A party," he murmured, entering the living room. "So it is. John, Carlos." He nodded to them.

Ortiz looked at Charlie and demanded, "Who told him?"

"Not me," Charlie said.

"It was Willy," Webber said in a choked-sounding voice. "That little bastard."

DeWilde said, "Now, John. Such language is not befitting a man of the cloth."

"What's your angle in this affair?" Charlie asked.

"I represent the United States government," DeWilde said.

"And I don't," Charlie said. "So what's your angle?"

"You see, Mr. Meiklejohn, the government has an interest in any treasure found within its boundaries—monetary, ethical, and moral interest. We can't let greedy treasure hunters simply benefit from stumbling across lost objects, sunken ships, what have you. Now can we?"

"We know how he operates. First, he skims the cream," Ortiz said angrily. "Then they demand we pay for what is ours. Yours is a money-mad government, I'm afraid. John, we should talk. Is there a private place, Mr. Meiklejohn?"

"The patio. Not too cool, I don't think. This way, gentlemen." He took them to the patio, then returned to study DeWilde, who was seated comfortably in Charlie's Morris chair.

"You want a cut," Charlie said. "Is that it?"

"I am working for the government, exactly as I stated. I do now and again, you see."

"And you just happened to learn they all came out here," Charlie commented.

"Something like that," DeWilde said with a smile. "We expect you to cooperate with us, Mr. Meiklejohn. Neither of them is to remove what they find before it's been inspected and appraised."

"Funny thing," Charlie said, still standing, "I have the feeling I'm a private citizen, minding my own business, doing my job to the best of my ability, getting by. You having them all tailed around the clock?"

"If they make a move to recover anything, I'll know. Neither one of them has any legitimate claim to the stuff, you must understand. It belongs to humanity. Isn't that the phrase?"

The doorbell rang again and Charlie went to see who else wanted to party. He grinned when he saw who was standing there this time. "Well, well," he said. "Rob Rob! And Peaches. Come in, gentlemen. Come right in."

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Rob Rob was Robert Roberts, and Peaches was his attorney, Oliver Pochoda. Rob Rob was getting on, Charlie thought; he must be over seventy, and he had given up the funny hairpiece he used to wear. When he took off a very nice fedora, his bald head gleamed like a waxed apple. Pochoda was not much younger; his hair was white and thick. Rob Rob was too fat, but he always had been too fat, and Oliver Pochoda was too thin. They were both elegantly dressed in thousand-dollar suits, topcoats that looked like vicuña, and Rob Rob had on a chartreuse and blue necktie that made Charlie blink.

"You're looking good, Charlie," Rob Rob said. No one offered to shake hands.

"And you look like hell," Charlie said cheerfully. "This way. You want to take off your coats, or stand around menacingly with your hands in your pockets?"

"We'll keep them," Rob Rob said. "Getting cold already, that kind of day."

DeWilde stood up when they entered; he looked confused. Charlie introduced them briefly and said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. You can discuss the weather for a few minutes, I'm sure."

He ducked out to the patio where Ortiz and Webber were talking heatedly in low voices. "I'm afraid Willy's been spilling the beans to quite a few people," Charlie said. "Two more just showed up. One's a big-time crook from New York City, and the other's his attorney." He spread his hands. "Not my doing, but there it is. It could be time to call off the treasure hunt. I'm afraid so many people out there with picks and shovels might do great damage to one another."

"No," Ortiz said. "You can still look into the matter, and report to us your findings. We will be responsible after that."

"Let's see what Rob Rob has on his mind," Charlie said. "You might decide to put this off for a hundred years or so."

When they returned to the living room, Charlie introduced everyone to everyone else. They all stood like wooden soldiers waiting for the bugle to sound, Charlie thought, and eased himself down into his Morris chair.

"I want to talk to my client," Pochoda said.

"Your client? Who?"

"Mr. William Bols. I represent him in this affair, and I demand to see him immediately. If you don't produce him, I'll be forced—"

"Peaches, shut up," Charlie said. "That's a cute angle, Rob Rob."

"No angle, Charlie. Willy's a friend; I look out for friends. We

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figure a percentage, not a flat fee. Willy owes me; he collects, I collect, he pays Mr. Pochoda, you get what you're after, and we all come out smiling. Right?"

"No!" Webber said. "Willy already has an agreement with us."

"Forced on him," Pochoda said. "Verbal agreement, worth the paper it's printed on. I have here a real contract. It is customary to offer a percentage of the appraised value to the finder, which is what we're demanding. Where is Mr. Bols?"

Charlie shrugged. "Funny, Willy didn't mention anything like that before."

"Willy is not a very good businessman, I'm afraid," Rob Rob said. "That's why I'm looking out for his interests. We really do want to speak with him, Charlie. I suggest you go get him."

"You know this man? He is your accomplice or something?" Ortiz asked.

"Oh, I've known Rob Rob for twenty-five years," Charlie said. He was hoping Constance had made some headway; he was not certain how long he could stall Rob Rob, and no doubt Willy would go mute on seeing him. "When Mrs. Roberts named her new son Robert, they nicknamed him, of course, and he took the diminutive as an imperative, and has been following it ever since. Nearly sent him away once," he added, speaking to Ortiz. "It didn't take, though. Peaches here pulled some strings, and lo and behold, Rob Rob was back in business."

Rob Rob glanced at Pochoda. "Why don't you go see if you spot Willy in the john or something."

"You know I won't let him do that," Charlie said softly, holding Rob Rob's gaze with his own.

Nervously Pochoda said, "Let's just talk a couple of minutes. We don't want trouble, Meiklejohn. Willy owes Mr. Roberts. It's that simple. No way can he collect unless Willy gets a new contract. Let these gentlemen sign it. Let Willy sign it, and we're out of here. I will be at the appraisal, of course. When Willy collects, he pays his debts. That's not too hard to understand. No skin off your nose."

"Maybe you two should go back to the patio and discuss this new development," Charlie said to Webber. Webber and Ortiz left the room, rigid with indignation.

"Sorry about the wire," Charlie murmured.

"No big deal. Would have shaken my confidence if you hadn't found it. I got you in on this, you know."

DeWilde had been silent, watchful, no longer amused. Now he

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said, "Mr. Roberts, I should introduce myself more fully. I represent the United States government in this matter. Mr. Pochoda can research the position the government has taken in the past concerning the handling of lost items, sunken ships, buried treasure, whatever. The Supreme Court has ruled favorably, without equivocation, that that position is legal and enforceable."

Rob Rob looked him up and down and deliberately turned away. "Yeah, Mr. Pochoda will do that." He took a step back, craned to see out through the dinette to the patio, apparently trying to see Webber and Ortiz. "Get Bols for me, Charlie. Then we'll beat it, let them talk some more. Guys like that, you know the problem with guys like them? Can't make up their minds. Talk, talk, talk, that's what they gotta do. We'll collect Willy and beat it and you tell them the score. Then we'll all have another little meeting. Day, two days. They'll need that, couple of days."

"Maybe they'll just pack their bags and go home," Charlie said.

"Nah, not them. They want what's out there buried somewheres. What they'll do is try to find a way to cut me out, cut Willy out. Just tell them how the world works, Charlie." He stopped looking out toward the patio. His gaze was death-cold. "Just tell them, Charlie. I'll give you a call. You can set up the next meeting. You going to bring out Willy, or is he?" He nodded toward Pochoda.

Charlie knew it was time. He got up and went to the hall. "He and Noreen are having a little talk," he said. "Be a minute."

"Talk!" Rob Rob said in disgust. "That's the problem with the world these days. Everyone's gotta talk, talk, talk."

Charlie went down the hall to the den and entered. Willy looked asleep; Noreen looked bored. Constance nodded at him.

"Time's up," Charlie said. "Willy, Rob Rob's out there. I don't think it's a good idea for you to tell him what you've been doing in here with my wife. He looks like a jealous man."

Willy leaped to his feet, his face a green/gray color.

"Take it easy," Charlie said. "He thinks you've been in here having a confab with Noreen. Not a bad way to leave it."

Willy moistened his lips and looked at Noreen, who had gone pale, too. "Yeah. Me and Noreen had stuff to talk over."

Charlie said to Constance, "I'll sing out when the coast is clear. Come on, Willy. I don't think Rob Rob likes to be kept waiting."

Willy and Noreen scurried out ahead of him. Rob Rob looked Willy over and turned toward the foyer. "Follow us," he said. Then, after one last look of disgust at the men on the patio, he

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said, "Tell them the way the world works, Charlie."

He walked out with Pochoda close enough to be his shadow; Willy and Noreen rushed after them, pulling on their jackets as they went.

"Now, Mr. DeWilde," Charlie said, "I think it's time for you to get in your little red car and tootle off."

DeWilde nodded. "That man can't buck the federal government," he said angrily.

"And just what the hell do you think he's been doing these past forty years or so?"

DeWilde went to the door. "I'll be in touch."

"I'm sure you will be," Charlie agreed. He locked the door after DeWilde went out, then he crossed to the window to watch the various cars leave his driveway.

He collected Constance, Ortiz, and Webber, and they all returned to the living room. He told Constance briefly what had happened, turned to Webber, and shrugged. "It's been interesting, a real fun day, but the deal's off. Sorry."

She felt certain he had looked away from her too quickly to have noticed the surge of fear Rob Rob's appearance had sent through her. Why had that man involved Charlie in this; what was he after? The treasure hunt no longer seemed funny. She became guarded, watchful.

"Why?" Webber asked Charlie. "You're not afraid of that gorilla, are you?"

"Sure I am. But that's beside the point. Look, on one hand you've got the United States government on your case; on the other, you've got a big-time gangster wanting in. One or the other will grab the booty, assuming we even get a scent of it. Which, frankly, I doubt. So what's the point?"

"He said he wants to collect a debt from Willy. Would he stop at that?"

Charlie shrugged again. "Maybe, especially since the Feds will be involved. I guess he has Willy on the payroll for the time being, financed his little private expedition, bought him a new car. But he smells real money. That debt could be a million dollars, Webber. Two million. Who knows what he'll say it is? Or if he'll stop there?"

Webber looked thoughtful. Softly Charlie asked, "Why don't you guys let me in on it? How much are we talking about here? How high would an appraisal go?"

Ortiz shook his head. "It's inestimable, Mr. Meiklejohn. I said

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priceless earlier; I spoke the literal truth. Is a Van Gogh worth twenty million dollars? Is a Picasso worth ten million? How does one put a price on art that is priceless?"

Abruptly Webber stood up. "Meiklejohn, I want you to go ahead. We'll give you what we have, you get started. It's going to take time, we all know that. Meanwhile, I'll consult with some of my people. No doubt, Carlos will do the same. Maybe a benevolent God will decide it's time for Mr. Roberts to encounter a truck. Deal?"

Watching him, Constance knew Charlie was not calling it off, not now, not with Rob Rob in the picture. Her chill deepened.

Charlie gazed at Webber for a minute before he said, "The first thing you should do is examine carefully those people you plan to consult. Rob Rob has tentacles that reach into very odd places. He already knows whatever Willy does, and then some. He knows about you two, maybe even what's in those graves. How much does DeWilde know already? I don't think you've considered the resources either of those two gentlemen can snap into action."

"We have our own resources," Webber said in a low voice. "So does Carlos. If, at a later date, we decide your advice is valid, we can always withdraw. The Church can be patient. But now, when we have many of the puzzle pieces, it wouldn't be a bad idea to see how they fit."

"I agree," Ortiz said. "You can make a start. As you intimated, perhaps there isn't quite enough to go on yet, in which case, you still benefit. You have our checks. I have no intention of stopping payment. I put myself at your disposal."

"And so do I," Webber said heartily, and sat down again, sprawled his legs out comfortably. "Who goes first?"

3.

Obviously the shipment could not be transported overland, it was decided. Mexican banditos, highwaymen, the U.S. Army, innkeepers, all posed a threat. Too many nights in transit, too many loadings and unloadings of what was obviously a very heavy burden. No, it had to be by ship, then by steamboat, by train . . . The *Delta Lady* from New Orleans to St. Louis was the answer. Once on board, the chests and boxes would not be moved again until they arrived where men of the faith would see to the unloading and safe transport to Our Lady of Peace and Tranquility Parish Church in St. Louis. Two priests and six Indian servants boarded at New Orleans.

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On July second, 1904, the *Delta Lady* stopped at New Madrid, and was there for four days. Two of the Indians had died; their bodies were removed to the care of the local priest. One Indian fled. The three remaining Indians were locked in the cabin the entire group had shared from the start of the trip. On July sixth the *Delta Lady* departed from New Madrid; its next scheduled stop was at Cairo, Illinois. It was never heard from again.

"Okay," John Webber said. "That's all pretty much in the public record. What isn't mentioned is the pervasive fear the other passengers had of the Catholic priests and their servants, the epidemic raging through the South, the bigotry . . ." His voice rose and with a visible effort he stopped, drew in a breath, then continued. "The priest at New Madrid wrote a letter, too. He said the group on the *Delta Lady* was terrified of overt anti-Catholic sentiment aboard the vessel. There were rumors the Catholics were spreading the disease on purpose, that the vessel itself was doomed; the captain and his crew wanted to put them off at New Madrid, and so on. Now it appears that the boat did land somewhere and put them off. Previously, it was assumed that the *Delta Lady* sank and everyone aboard perished."

"Your people made searches, I suppose," Charlie said.

"Of course. A dozen or more over the years. They even sent in divers in diving bells at one point. Never a trace."

"Okay. The cargo. What do you know about that?"

Webber moistened his lips. "There were four wooden crates, about fifteen by fifteen, twelve inches deep maybe. One large trunk, three feet by two, by two. Oak, with brass fittings, a domed top." He stopped, then said, almost as if he had overlooked this item, "Oh yes, a small box of some sort. Twelve inches by twelve, about eight inches deep, with a domed lid."

"Oak?"

"I believe it's carved teak. Brass fittings."

He had a list of the crew members and passengers, he said; they all had been investigated thoroughly. None who remained on the boat ever showed up again after July sixth. The Indian who had fled probably died soon after running away.

"Quite a few of the passengers disembarked at New Madrid; many of them died. The survivors were located and questioned. They confirmed the hostility, the fear. They reported talk among some passengers that they should seize the trunks."

He filled in a few more details, and promised to send by messenger many documents to provide the history of the different

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searches that had been made, anything else Charlie wanted.

When Ortiz entered the den, he was carrying a folder. He bowed stiffly to John Webber, who was on his way to the living room, bowed again toward Constance and Charlie, then watched Webber for a moment before pulling the door closed.

"My government was negotiating in good faith with his church," Ortiz started.

"No more history for the moment," Charlie said.

"I just want to tell you this," Ortiz said.

Charlie hated it when anyone just wanted to tell him what he didn't want to know. He said, "That's all history, Mr. Ortiz. I take it you have sufficient cause to believe you have a stake in finding that stuff. Let's let it go at that."

"We thought they were negotiating in good faith, as well," Ortiz said. "They stole away in the dead of night, and by the time we knew, the ship was gone, they were gone. We sent horsemen—"

Charlie stood up and started for the door. "No more history," he said.

Ortiz jumped to his feet. "Please," he said. "Forgive me. It's simply that their claim is so unjust. . . ."

Charlie went back to his chair, and both men sat down again. "You searched, too?"

"Yes, several times, and we observed their searches, as well. And we made a land search after Willy Bols turned up. Nada."

"Okay," Charlie said. "I want the Spanish letter."

"Of course. Not the original, however. It is in very bad shape. But photographs, photocopies, and our translation. Meanwhile, I have here my memory of what I read in that letter. It's exactly word for word what you will find there, but much of it was indecipherable. Our best people cannot make out more than I have reproduced here."

He opened the file folder and withdrew a sheet of paper. "See, this is how it looked, to the best of my poor ability to render a facsimile. Willy did not handle it with care, obviously; pieces flaked off, he pulled it apart . . ." He sighed, and they all peered at his drawing.

He had sketched a rectangle in heavy black lines, and within it the outline of the letter, an irregularly shaped fragment only, the top almost completely gone, the bottom part gone, part of the middle gone.

"I have studied this letter for many hours," he said slowly, taking another sheet of paper from the folder; this one had writing on

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it. "These are the phrases and words we have to work with." He placed the letter on the coffee table by the couch.

Charlie and Constance studied the letter on the low table. ". . . take Christ's tears to his grave. *Por Dios*. . . May I be worthy of such suffering . . . followed the finger, beckoning . . . in His footsteps . . . torrents unceasing, how the beast struggles . . . no rain will wash away Christ's tears, never a softer pillow . . . cursed rain, cursed mud . . . *Madre,* have mercy . . . Patrick's tears, Christ's tears flow together where the angels dance . . ."

Charlie looked at Ortiz with incredulity and frustration. "That's it? You expect that to get us anywhere?"

Ortiz spread his hands. "The original is in such poor condition. We used enhancing techniques to make this much legible. Patrick was Patrick O'Bannon, and there was enough of the signature to reconstruct the other name, Domingo Sanchez. But there are clues, Mr. Meiklejohn. Among our people, the setting sun on a rock can be seen as a finger beckoning. Or the sun on a dead tree spur, a planet sinking below the horizon, Venus perhaps. . . . If we know where to start looking, we may see the signs."

"And you might see angels dancing," Charlie said morosely. He put the sheets of paper in the folder and closed it. "Ortiz, what's in those graves?"

"We've told you. Many items, some of them religious items, some fine art. What more can I say?" He smiled; his teeth were perfect.

"How heavy would those things be?"

"Very heavy," he said gravely. "The big chest, very heavy indeed. Even the smallest cask would be heavy." He smiled again.

Charlie, aware that his own teeth were not perfect, aware of a gold cap that showed when he opened his mouth, did not smile. "Let's go talk to your pal and wrap this up for now."

In the living room he said, "Rob Rob will give me a call in a day or two. What do I tell him?"

"We want to see the contract, have our own attorneys look at it. I've been thinking," Webber said, "if he has a legal contract, with witnesses, the weight of the law behind it, he stands to make a bit of money legitimately. Why try anything illegal?"

Charlie shrugged. "So what do I tell him?"

"We can have our attorneys get in touch with Mr. Pochoda. Let the legal beagles snap at each other for a few months. Is that agreeable, Carlos?"

Ortiz nodded.

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"I want to see any contract you come up with," Charlie said unhappily. They both nodded.

4.

"I say we tell them to find someone else," Constance said after all the guests had departed.

"My first idea exactly," he admitted. "But, honey, we have fifty grand I'd sure hate to hand back. And since there's no way we can find anything, what's the harm in digging a little?"

"Digging where?"

"Beats me," he said with a grin. "You get any more from Willy?"

"Not much. And it's so scrappy, it's worthless. I jotted down phrases as he remembered them, and they may or may not be in any particular order. He said a lot of it didn't make any sense at all, and I believe him."

She produced the sheet of paper she had written on, and they read the phrases together. ". . . after . . . overland through the canyons and valleys . . . God sent the Negro to us and showed the way . . . buried Pedro and Juan . . . good and faithful servants . . . Pepito first . . . May God have mercy . . . Juan rests on the great parcel . . . God's will . . . Domingo or I will share Christ's tears . . . guard . . . for eternity . . . Pray for a priest in Paducah . . ."

He looked up, feeling very dim and blank. "Me too," she said. "Ed mentioned that he and his father had been staying close to the river, living off fish, corn, and blackberries. That's it."

"I'll stash this in the safe with the other stuff," Charlie said, then paused. Constance was gazing off abstractedly. Not the cruise again, he hoped. "Something?"

"Something," she said, bringing her focus back to him. "You. We agree that we're not likely to come up with anything. Are you looking for a chance to get Rob Rob?"

"Honey," he said in protest, a touch too quickly, "do you see any way on earth I could do that?"

She shook her head. "But I can hear your wheels spinning. Leave him alone, Charlie. He's part of the past, done with."

He started for the door, carrying the sheet of paper. "Honey, promise you, if such a thought occurs to me in any serious way, you'll be the first to know."

She could hear his wheels spinning, he thought, going to his office safe. Hah! His wheels were mired in mud. If there was any way on God's green ball of grass that he could get at Rob Rob, he'd do it, but the wheels refused to turn.

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In the den she was remembering the case he had worked on meticulously, secretly with his partner, for over six months, making certain that Rob Rob wouldn't find a way out. There had been other times before and after this one when the police had come close to nailing Rob Rob, but this case, Charlie had said, was so airtight a match wouldn't light in it, and he had done it. The perfect case, a certain conviction of guilty as charged for a double murder. Within two hours of the arrest, Pochoda had gotten him out. Rob Rob had an alibi. A United States congressman, a millionaire businessman, and a famous psychiatrist had all sworn Rob Rob had spent the evening of the murders playing poker with them.

First, Charlie had gotten drunk, then, sober again, he had cleaned and oiled his revolver and started out. She had blocked the door. That was the first time she had threatened to leave him. She no longer knew if she would have done it then, but neither had he known at the time. They had argued, fought, most of that night; he had raged, detailed more horror than she had known existed, all laid at Rob Rob's feet, and she very nearly had come to agree with him that if the law couldn't handle a man like that, a person had to. But he would have been killed, too, she had understood. One way or another, he would have died. She had no doubt that if he believed he could get Rob Rob now, after all these years, he would do it.

On Monday materials began arriving: detailed maps of the Mississippi from Natchez to Cairo; pamphlets about the locks and dams on the river, other studies concerning the levees and natural and man-made barriers to keep the river where it belonged; a lengthy report on the many dramatic floods that had made a mockery of those attempts; a drawing of the *Delta Lady,* topographical maps of the flood plains of Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois; history books on the Catholic Church and its mission in the New World; a history of the monastery where the two priests had lived and worked; other history books on the same subjects written by nonbelievers; beautifully illustrated books of Mayan and Aztec art, much of it in the vaults and museums of the Church; detailed reports on the disappearance of the *Delta Lady* and the subsequent searches that had been made by everyone from the United States government to insurance companies to the Church and the Mexicans; an epidemiological study of the various waves of this and that that had swept the

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nation from 1882 to the present. . . . They settled in to read.

The crocuses gave way to daffodils; the apple trees bloomed, turned green. She conducted her regular aikido classes. He tilled the garden and she planted seeds. Asparagus shoots appeared. One of the cats left a dead rat on the back stoop, and daily for the next three days repeated the act.

Rob Rob called and said the lawyers were *talking, talking.* Charlie told him to send Willy back and the next day he appeared with Noreen. They didn't get anything useful. It had rained or stormed every day, he said; Ed had told him he sank up to his knees in mud. They all had to walk because the horse couldn't pull the wagon in the mud with it loaded. Ed never said how long they took to get to Paducah.

Constance worked at getting more details about the letter he had seen, but that, too, was useless. All that holy stuff made his eyes glaze over, he said resentfully. She suspected that his reading skills had not been sufficient to get more than he had.

Ortiz and Webber both called and Charlie told them to leave him alone until he got in touch. DeWilde paid a visit; Charlie was rude to him and sent him away again.

The Mississippi, the Missouri, the Red River, the Arkansas River were all in flood that spring. Charlie and Constance watched a special on television about the efforts being made to keep the water back, to shore up the levees, to erect new ones. The river danced over the land, Charlie thought, cutting itself a new channel here, there, wherever it wanted, and later they redrew the maps. A bow was cut through to create a crescent-shaped lake, and the river had a new path to the Gulf. A trickle strayed around a hill, over a bit of low land; more followed, and there was a new island in the river, another new channel. It flowed south to Cairo, met the waters of the Ohio River, and presently, bigger than ever, turned north again, up to New Madrid. A river shouldn't go north and south, east and west.

Suddenly Charlie grunted and sat up straighter on the couch in the den. Constance looked at him.

"All those maps we've been studying," he said. "Pointless. We need maps from nineteen four. How many times have there been major floods since then? Nineteen thirteen, twenty-seven, thirty-seven, ninety-three, now . . ."

"Webber can find them," she said after a moment.

"They probably already thought of it," he said, "but they didn't know Willy's part of the story yet. Ortiz is looking westward from

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the Mississippi, in Missouri. Webber is, too. Let's not clue them in to turn one hundred eighty degrees and start looking. Topo maps of both sides of the river from Cairo to . . . what? A hundred miles south?"

She was nodding. "The roads have changed, no doubt. We need more than just geological maps; we need farms, roads, towns, everything for miles inland from the river, too."

He grinned. "The distance from the Mississippi to Paducah, plus or minus twenty. Okay?"

"Plus," she said.

"Right." He glanced at his watch. Nine-thirty. Not too late to call Webber. He went to the phone.

"He said there aren't such maps," Charlie said when he hung up. "You heard what I said." What he had said was that Webber should put some cartographers to work and create them. "They'll have to start digging in local county seat records for property holdings, farms, that kind of stuff. They'll start at Cairo and work south. It will take some time."

She nodded. "We have time."

"Poor Webber," he murmured. Then, "What in hell do you suppose is worth this kind of trouble and expense?"

They had not discussed the contents of the various trunks and crates since it had seemed pointless to speculate. It was a treasure hunt, was Charlie's thought, and hers too; a treasure trove of gold was out there buried. Now, however, in answer to his rhetorical question, she said, "Christ's tears." She was as surprised as he was by the answer.

He blinked. "Meaning?"

"Well, both letters mentioned Christ's tears. I can't believe those two names alone, Patrick and Domingo, were enough to send a signal on a data base. But the names and the words 'Christ's tears'? Maybe those words raised a flag and brought Ortiz and Webber running."

"Let's look at those letters again," Charlie said.

He read aloud the phrases from the English letter: "Juan rests on the great parcel . . . Domingo or I will share Christ's tears . . . guard . . . for eternity . . ." He picked up the Spanish translation and read: ". . . take Christ's tears to his grave . . . no rain will wash away Christ's tears, never a softer pillow . . . Patrick's tears, Christ's tears flow together where the angels dance . . ."

He looked up from the letters to her. "I think you've got it. What it is, God knows, but that's it. Christ's tears. A thing, an

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artifact of some sort, not just a figure of speech."

"I think so," she said. "Now all we have to do is find out where the angels dance." She was regarding the letters. "You know, this phrase, 'Pray for a priest in Paducah,' why pray for him? I wonder if it doesn't mean pray that there will be a priest in Paducah. I wonder if they didn't intend for Abe Worsham to deliver their letters to a priest, not for him to mail them. He could have led a priest back to the graves. If he hadn't been able to find a priest there, that would explain a lot." Ruefully she added, "I wish Willy had asked a few more questions of Ed Worsham."

"Honey, you're doing just fine," Charlie said. "Let's think about where the angels dance. Spanish moss in the wind?"

"Or the play of sunlight on leaves. Birds. Butterflies. Shadows." She shook her head. "Maybe he was delirious and saw angels dancing."

"Was the other one delirious, too? Or did he really see canyons and valleys?"

"How could he?" she asked. She stood up and went to the big Webster's dictionary on a stand in the den. He followed. "Angels," she muttered. "Angel bed, angel cake, fish, eyes." She read that one: angel eyes—bluets—and made a note. "Angel light, pie, red, angel's hair . . . angel's trumpet—datura." She made another note and read on down the list.

"What's a bluet?" Charlie asked.

She pulled a book from the garden shelf and found "bluet." "Knapweed, *Centaurea montana,* perennial, mountains of Central Europe. . . . Maybe," she said doubtfully. "It's something like a bachelor button, I think, pretty common, but is that too far south for it to thrive? Don't know. Angel's trumpet is the datura plant," she added. "That, at least, is from Mexico and south. I don't know if it would thrive in such a humid climate; it likes deserts and wastelands." She replaced the book with a sigh. "I just can't imagine describing either of them as angels dancing." She frowned, then said, "Too much thinking. Let's go to bed."

He chuckled. "My kind of woman, direct, straightforward, no shilly-shallying. You're on."

She gave him one of her looks.

Ten days later Webber delivered a package in person. "New maps," he said. "And a report of our last search. I believe we inadvertently left that out of the original report." He lied with such ease, he could have been a television salesman. Today he was

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dressed in a shirt open at the neck, and lightweight slacks. June had brought in a heat wave; the air was thick and sultry, thunderstorm weather.

"Get your contract settled with Rob Rob yet?" Charlie asked, leading him to the back patio, where it was not really cool, but cool-looking, with deep shade from vines that had covered the lattice top. All three cats appeared to be dead, their remains sprawled on the patio; Brutus got up deliberately, hoisted his tail, and stalked off. Ashcan fled in terror. Candy did not move.

"I brought that, too," Webber said with a grimace. "Are you making any progress at all?"

"Following our noses," Charlie said. "Running down ideas. Let's have a look at your map."

They had started with the west side of the Mississippi, and had prepared a topographical map of how it had been a hundred years ago. "To the best of their ability," Webber said. "That was a difficult order, Meiklejohn. As they fill in more, we'll send them along. The other side is even sketchier, I'm afraid."

He spread the map on the table and pointed to a spot marked with a small red circle. "That's an old fueling station. You know, the steamships had to stop to pick up wood along the way. Accounts for a lot of the deforestation. Anyway, last summer Carlos and a crew took a boat out and docked there and mucked around for about a week, then left. We went in afterward and poked around. Then we left. Since we now know the boat put the group ashore between New Madrid and Cairo, that seemed as likely a place as any. It's the only place they could have docked," he added.

The site was on the Missouri bank of the river. Charlie studied it, then said, "Does seem likely, doesn't it?" Why not there? he wondered. Why not the fueling station dock? Across the river from the fueling station was Kentucky. There was no dock on the Kentucky side.

"There must be a clue in that Spanish letter Carlos has," Webber said. "Something sent him over there to look. If the three of us put our heads together, maybe we can uncover it."

Charlie grinned. "How about some lemonade? Hot day like this, we find lemonade hits the spot."

Webber looked petulant as he groped in his briefcase for the copy of the contract with Rob Rob. He handed it to Charlie, who paid scant attention to it. It would mean exactly what Rob Rob decided it meant. Webber hung around until Charlie politely invited him to go away.

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As soon as he was gone, Constance and Charlie spread out two maps on the dining room table, one current, the other, provided by Webber, of how it had been nearly a hundred years earlier.

Now and again one or the other murmured something: "This road wasn't there." "Just a track from one farm to another." "Swampy, must have flooded routinely back then." "Must have been a dirt road to let them put a rowboat in the water or something."

Charlie gave up first; it was his day to cook dinner, and his back ached from too much leaning over. Constance pointed to a road on the current map. "I bet Willy thought that road was the one they took. But it wasn't even there then. They seem to have relocated it miles to the north, around that marsh."

She was studying the maps as he left to see about dinner. Later, on the patio, they ate shrimp sautéed with green garlic, rice, and peas, a lush salad of many mixed greens. They were still there when the first fireflies appeared and the mosquitoes swarmed. All three cats were lying in wait for their share of shrimp. Constance was thinking about the sick priests, Abe and the child Ed, the Indians, being eaten alive in swampy land in July. Lightning flashed so far away that no sound of thunder carried to the patio. Lightning could be seen as angels dancing, she mused, if one was extremely fanciful. She shook her head and they started to carry dishes to the kitchen.

Charlie stopped just inside the sliding door, both hands filled. "How did they manage that?" he muttered.

"What?" She stepped around him and put her dishes down on the counter.

He moved then, put the bowls he was carrying on the kitchen table, and continued on to the dining room where he switched on the lights and peered at the 1904 map again.

"They stayed close to the river, lived off fish and corn, and berries. Remember? But there's no road that follows the river."

She looked. Of course, there wouldn't have been, she thought; it would have been washed out over and over. Fields, up and down the shoreline as far as the map showed. She drew back with her eyes narrowed. "Charlie, you never paid a lot of attention to our fields back home, did you?" She had grown up on a dairy farm in Minnesota. "Dad always left a pretty wide strip along each field; we used them as roads for the tractor, for the wagons to bring out the wheat. You have to leave that space clear to have access."

He began to trace the outlines of fields, farms with boundaries

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marked in some places, not in others. "That's it," he said. "If they stayed at the edges of the fields, they could have kept close to the river. How big is a farm wagon?"

She shook her head. "Cart. Willy first said a horse and cart. Later everyone called it a wagon, because that's what we're used to. But it must have been a cart, small enough to use the margins of the fields for a road. That's why they were up to their knees in mud. They might never have been on a real road."

Charlie felt a tingling in his spine as he looked at the map. "How high would corn have been in July?"

"I don't know. Field corn in the South, eight feet tall maybe. Why?"

"Valleys," he said in a low voice. "Canyons. As soon as they turned east they were closed in on both sides by corn over their heads."

They were startled by a thunder clap near enough to shake the house. "Stuff on the table," Charlie muttered, and hurried out to finish clearing away leftovers.

Brutus leaped off the table bearing the last of the shrimp with him. Candy was nearby cleaning her face fastidiously; Ashcan was sniffing at the patio floor in apparent bewilderment. With a sigh Charlie stacked plates on the platter and carried them inside. Lightning was playing on the horizon in a continuous dance. Thunder sounded again, closer, and they rushed to finish.

She got the candles out and put them on the dinette table, and he found the kerosene lamp, just in case. Then they stood at the door, his arm around her shoulders, her arm around his waist, and they watched the storm approach. He was remembering another storm, a long time ago, when their daughter was still an infant. *What if lightning hit, and people found us like this?* she had asked, and he had said, *They'd be jealous.* Not a bad way to go. He tightened his arm and drew her nearer.

"It's the ozone," she murmured.

"What is?"

"What makes you so horny when it storms."

The lights flickered and went out, and they went to bed, exactly as he had known they would.

The next day they went to a copy shop and made copies and transparencies of the 1904 maps. Then, back in the dining room, they started to work.

"What we know," Constance said, studying the map with the

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transparency taped over it precisely, "is that they were able to drag the big bundle a quarter of a mile away from the river. Not on a road, or why not stay on it? Abe must have met them on one of the margins of the fields. Not too far from open ground where they could bury them. . . ."

"You don't think they just buried the guys in the corn fields? Why not?"

"Because you don't," she said without looking up.

He grinned. *Because.* As good a reason as any. "They must have been taken ashore in a small boat. Did steamships use lifeboats?"

"I don't know. But you're right. So we need some sort of beach with a trail leading away from it."

"Some place visible to Abe," he added.

By late afternoon they had located four possible landing sites and traced them with erasable markers on the transparency. They eliminated one of them quickly. Too far from a good place for a grave, she had muttered.

"If that was an unusually wet summer, I just don't see how we can narrow it down more than this," Constance said when it was nearly time for her to start dinner.

"And if it was a normal summer, you see light at the end of the tunnel?" he asked glumly. All he saw was an impossible task, try out one after another of those trails and look for angels dancing.

"Well, yes," she said. "Ed sank to his knees in mud. Remember? That suggests up here near this marshy area if the summer was normal."

"They had rain and thunderstorms every day," he reminded her.

"Well, we do too, almost. And you won't sink like that anywhere."

True, he thought. Their yard had been scrubbed clean by the storm of the previous evening, but there wasn't any mud anywhere. "I can find out," he said then. "There must be a meteorology group talking about weather even as we sit here. I'll go ask."

He went to his office to go on-line, and she went to the kitchen to cook. His answer was posted at nine that night: That summer had been on the dry side. She smiled sweetly at him.

"Okay, eenie meenie miney time," he said, back at the map. North or south of the swamp?"

The swamp was eight to ten miles from east to west, a mile or two from north to south. Swamp, then some higher rocky ground, another road several miles north, and more fields.

"We need a timetable," she said after a moment. "Abe and his

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son met the priests in midmorning, probably. They already had dragged the bundle a quarter of a mile, remember? I don't imagine they made more than five or six miles that day. Then one died, and they had to find a burial site, dig a grave. . . . That would have been day two . . ."

Slowly they filled in the timetable as they speculated on how long the events they knew about might have taken. Then they placed the marked transparency over the current map and surveyed it. One of the trails they had marked was a mile or two north of State Highway 62, and even merged with it at two spots. One was on U.S. Highway 60.

She became aware that Charlie was regarding her; when she looked up at him, his eyes were shining, and a grin was playing at his mouth.

"Honey," he said, "what if we could pinpoint it enough to go start digging?"

But it was a game, she started to say, a treasure-hunt game. An image of Rob Rob, followed by many men with guns, followed by U.S. marshals came to mind. She looked down at the map, back to him, and she said, "What if?"

"Let's knock off this part and go talk," he said.

When she and Charlie went to bed, they were both bleary.

The next morning, she found him whistling softly as he scrambled eggs, timed precisely for her arrival downstairs. He always woke up first, and he most often woke up hungry and happy. It was a mystery to her how he could be so cheerful so early, but she liked his breakfasts. His crinkly black hair sparkled with water diamonds.

He served the eggs; the toast popped up and she went to fetch it and the coffee. Neither talked as they ate, but over his second cup of coffee, Charlie said, "They expected someone to find the graves. They marked them somehow."

"The priest in Paducah? He could have hired Abe to take him there."

"I don't think so," Charlie said. "I have to ask Webber, but I doubt they would have trusted a stranger with such a treasure. I bet they wanted him to make certain the letter was sent to a proper authority, either in Mexico or Rome, or maybe somewhere else, which could mean no one would get back to the graves for many months. But the graves had to be findable."

"We need to know more about those two priests," she said thoughtfully.

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"Right. We know enough to know what we don't know. That's a real step forward."

"Willy said Ed Worsham told him they put a curse on the grave with the big bundle. I want to ask him a few more questions."

"At some point we're going to have to go have a look," Charlie said almost absently, thinking of two trails, each about forty miles long, with possible graves almost anywhere along either of them. "And without a gaggle of geese at our heels."

"I know," she said. "Any ideas?"

"Lots, but most of them are pretty bad. Let's think about it. How about a little trip down to New York, hole up in a hotel a couple of days and have a go at them all again?"

After a moment she nodded, not at all thrilled by the idea.

5.

Three days later they checked into the Grand Hyatt at noon, and an hour after that Carlos Ortiz arrived. He looked at their small room with disapproval. "We don't expect you to stint on expenses," he murmured.

Charlie had to move aside for him to enter. "We practice frugality," Charlie said. "Years of practice; we're getting pretty good at it."

"You have something for us, something definite?"

"In a word, yes. Did you bring the material we asked for?"

"Of course. Mr. Meiklejohn, do you know where the graves are?" He had turned pale; his voice quavered.

"I believe Mr. Ortiz is feeling ill," Constance said. "Would you like a drink of water?"

Charlie put his hand on Ortiz's arm; Ortiz was shaking. Wordlessly Constance went to the door and opened it; Charlie put his finger on his lips, and pulled Ortiz back to the door. When he started to speak, Charlie shook his head and touched his lips again. They left the room and walked out, past the elevators to the stairs.

"What are you doing?" Ortiz demanded on the stairs.

"Safe room," Charlie said easily. "That one's bugged, twice. Probably DeWilde and Rob Rob's doing."

They walked down to the twelfth floor, on to another door, which Charlie opened with the computer key to reveal a suite. A low table had an assortment of bottles, ice in a bucket, glasses. Brian had done it up just fine, Charlie thought with approval. Using a phone in Fircrest, he had called Brian Posner, an investi-

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gator he sometimes used, and told him exactly what to do, and here they were. He grinned. There were tubs of plants, with a mirror behind them, intensifying a jungle effect. A low couch, four easy chairs, stereo and television. . . . No frugality in evidence here.

"A drink? Juice? Coffee? Seems we have it all," he commented, glancing over the table. "I'm going to leave you here with Constance, and in about fifteen minutes bring your pal Webber in. Then we'll talk. Constance has a few questions to ask while I'm gone. Okay?"

Ortiz sank down onto the couch. "Bugged! My God!"

Back in the other room, Charlie clinked a glass, shuffled papers, and once he said, "Just read, then we talk." He waited for Webber by the open door, took his arm, and led him down the stairs to the suite. Constance and Ortiz were sitting side by side on the couch with cups of coffee.

"We bought ourselves a little time, a little privacy," Charlie said, taking one of the comfortable chairs across the table from Constance and Ortiz. "They're on to the trick by now, maybe already looking for us. So we don't want to waste time. I have a list of questions, and I want straight answers. I don't give a damn who tells me what, just so I get answers."

Webber was still standing, frowning at Ortiz. "What have you been telling them?"

"Sit down," Charlie snapped. "First, do you have a portable metal detector that can find the loot if it's five or six feet down? How many guys would you need to dig it out and haul it to a truck or something in the shortest possible time? Do you have people you can trust not to talk, to dig without questions? Who would those priests have written to? Have you paid Willy what you owe him? What do you plan to do about Rob Rob? About DeWilde? If you could put your hands on the stuff, then what? Have you decided how to split it up without bloodshed?" He grinned amiably. "That's enough for starters. Webber, why don't you sit down." He motioned toward a chair across from him.

Webber nearly fell down. While his jaw wasn't really hanging, it gave that appearance. "You know!" he whispered. Huskily he said, "They would have written to the bishop in Mexico, who knew what they were transporting, and he would have sent people to them."

"What did they tell people they were transporting?" Charlie asked.

"The Mexican was a horticulturist; he was in charge of deliver-

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ing a lot of plant material to St. Louis. O'Bannon had a trunk of books," Webber said. "That was their story."

"If I can get my part of the material to our embassy," Ortiz said thoughtfully, "we'd let the lawyers haggle for the rest of their lives."

Webber nodded. "Same for me. Once the items are secure, what can DeWilde or that crook do? We paid Willy the first half, then that crook showed up and there didn't seem any point in paying him more until the matter was settled."

"Pay him his money," Charlie said. "You'd unilaterally cancel the contract you signed?"

"It was signed under duress," Webber said grimly.

"We could each provide four men," Ortiz said. "For the digging, transporting, security. Four each would be sufficient. We have the metal detectors," he added.

"So do we," Webber said.

"You've come to an agreement how to divide the stuff?"

Neither spoke for a minute. Then Webber said, "He doesn't know everything in that bundle. We have the inventory, not them. There are pieces I would not dispute," he said slowly.

"There are pieces I must have," Ortiz said.

"Christ's tears," Charlie murmured.

They both started in surprise.

"Their name for it," Ortiz said furiously. "It is a sculpture that predates the conquest by centuries!"

"The Church will never give it up," Webber said with conviction. "That piece isn't to be included in the division."

Charlie picked up a bottle of Jack Daniels and poured some into a glass. He added ice cubes and swished it around. "Okay. I've got my fifty grand. Some day, five years from now, ten, I'll go dig it up myself and sell it to the highest bidder." He tasted his drink with appreciation.

They raged, and he looked off into space and sipped his drink until it was gone. He wanted another one, but decided against it.

"They said you were an honorable man," Webber said bitterly.

"Maybe the only one present," Charlie murmured. "I'll tell you the rest of it and let you go huddle some more. We'll want a houseboat, something that will sleep all of us, and your eight diggers. A trustworthy crew to take care of it, cook, all that. That's for openers. It could be docked at Cairo, as good a place as any. Don't go near it yourselves or put your diggers aboard until and unless I give the word. It would be nice if it didn't get bugged. I'm sure you

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have associates who can arrange it. Constance and I are taking a little vacation; we'll be out of touch for a few days. When we get back, I'll give you a call. If you've reached an agreement about the sculpture, we'll go on from there. Otherwise, that's it." He stood up. "Oh, one more thing. You should assume you're being watched, listened to."

He let them fume a few more minutes, then escorted them to the door. "I'll call next week," he said. He closed the door and locked it, put the chain on, then said, "Let's see how much we got."

He went to the tubs of plants and moved one, moved the mirror, to reveal a camcorder on a stand. He turned it off, removed the cassette, and put it in the VCR, and they watched themselves and Ortiz enter the room. The picture was very clear. Charlie left and returned with Webber, and that, too, was good and sharp. Then Charlie walked to the door with both men, all duly recorded. There was no sound.

At two-thirty they went to meet Willy in Shannon's Bar, a dim, loud place with tiny tables and too many patrons. Willy was at a table with Rob Rob, who was too fat to get near the table. No one was crowding him in the crowded bar.

There were no greetings as they drew near the table, pulled out chairs, and sat down. The waiter came and Charlie pointed to Willy's beer. Constance shook her head. Rob Rob was drinking mineral water.

"Just a few things we want to get straight," Charlie said. "How crazy was Ed Worsham when you talked with him?"

"Crazy. I don't know. He'd start to talk and forget what he was saying and drift off, you know, just nuts, old."

"Think hard, Willy. Did he mention St. Louis?"

Willy shook his head. Rob Rob picked up his glass of water, and Willy frowned, thinking. "Nah, no St. Louis."

"How long did it take to reach Paducah once they were rid of the priests and their baggage?"

"Hey, Meiklejohn, he was a little kid. He didn't know, a couple of days is what he said."

"That figures," Charlie said thoughtfully. "Abe was heading north, toward the first bridge. After he crossed the bridge, it was easy going the rest of the way, thirty miles on a real road, couple of days."

"He said the priests were heading for Paducah," Rob Rob said. He was watching Charlie like a snake eyeing a bird. "You're

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thinking of that fueling station. Forget it. There were people there."

"People!" Charlie said scornfully. "A handful of working stiffs, manning the station. Would you go near a bunch kicked off the boat if you thought they were carrying plague?" He shook his head. "Abe wanted to go to Paducah, on up to Cincinnati, but the priests? They were on their way north to St. Louis." He looked at Willy sadly. "You threw us a foul ball, I'm afraid. We've been busting our butts in the wrong place, wrong side of the river."

"There's nothing about St. Louis in any of the records," Rob Rob said. His eyes were narrower than before, meaner.

"So sue me. There's nothing on the record, period. Willy, what about the curse? What did Ed say about that?"

Rob Rob made a disgusted sound, then inclined his head at Willy. "Tell him."

"I already told you what he said," Willy whined. He glanced at Rob Rob and said quickly, "Okay, okay. Ed was scared of those guys. The Spanish one, he did the mumbo jumbo at the Indian's grave where they hid the big bundle, and he threw stones in, then put more dirt on the stones. Ed said it was a curse."

Charlie shook his head. "Stones? He picked up stones and tossed them on the grave?"

"He had the stones in a bag," Willy said hurriedly. "I forgot that part. A black bag or something. He cursed them and tossed them on the Indian's grave. He did it again when they buried the other priest, and he used them all up, and that time he was crying."

Suddenly Constance stood up. "I want to do a little shopping."

"Catch up with you later," he said, and watched her walk out. She walked as if she owned the joint, he thought with pleasure. He liked watching her walk, the loose gait she had, the way she held her head.

"Shop and talk, talk and shop, that's all they know," Rob Rob said, dismissing Constance. "You want anything else with Willy?"

"Yep. A few things." He didn't, but neither did he want them to know he had gotten what he was after. He asked a few more questions. Finally Charlie shrugged. "We wasted two months on that crazy story about Paducah. Now I have to start over."

"Go tell Sid to bring the car around," Rob Rob said, not looking at Willy, who instantly got up and hurried out. Rob Rob studied Charlie for a moment, then said, "We go back a long way, you and me. You've got something. That's okay, that's what you were tagged for. But Charlie, don't try to get cute. Nothing funny,

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nothing cute. We figure the appraisal will come in around twenty million, and we're in for twenty percent. You can do the numbers. You don't want to get between me and my cut."

"Why don't you retire?" Charlie asked pleasantly. "Aren't you afraid all this stress and excitement might be bad for the ticker?" Rob Rob had had a triple bypass two years earlier.

"See to it that there isn't any stress and excitement," he snapped. "I'll take care of my health, and you watch out for yours." He heaved himself up from his chair and waddled out.

He was not doing a very good job of taking care, Charlie thought, fishing a twenty from his pocket. It was fifteen minutes after three. At three-thirty he had a date. He left the bar and strolled along Lexington leisurely for a block or so, then turned on a one-way street, walking against the traffic. At three-thirty a Ford Taurus slowed down, stopped in traffic at Charlie's side, to an instant outburst of horns. Charlie opened the door and got in.

"Hi, Brian, good timing. Probably two cars will be tagging along as soon as they get a fix on your license plate."

Brian had ginger-colored hair, a florid complexion, and very blue eyes. He was forty-three, and good enough that if Charlie ever decided he needed another partner, Brian would be it. Brian was grinning. "Someone's license plate," he said. Charlie leaned back and let him do his thing.

Constance was right, he thought, New York was no place for a sane person to operate an automobile. Traffic was worse than he remembered; every time he came to town it was worse than he remembered. Too damn many people. Too damn many cars. He was starting to think his followers would catch up just by sauntering along, when traffic moved forward through an intersection.

"Okay," Brian said. "I'm going to pull into the next lane. Sandy Milosevic will pull up even on your side, green Honda, right behind us now. First stop, I'll let her edge ahead, and you're out of here."

"Right," Charlie said. "Good old Sandy Miles, still playing cops and robbers."

"You got it," Brian said, and eased into the next lane over. Horns blasted the air.

"I'll call when we get back," Charlie said, watching the green Honda draw even with the Ford. Sandy didn't glance his way. They stopped again; he opened his door, stepped out, opened the back door of the Honda, and slid in. She moved forward and made a last-minute decision to turn at the next intersection, as a surge

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of cars pressed forward, the drivers all thinking, no doubt, that the green light meant they had the right-of-way.

"Hiya, Charlie. Jesus, I thought you retired." She was a bottle blonde, with a cute little snub nose and freckles; she was sixty or more, and looked forty. It was the nose and freckles, he had decided years ago when she was forty and looked twenty.

"Sandy, you look terrific," he said.

"Yeah, I know. I've been working out, jogging, eating tofu, you know, all the good stuff. Ma lived to be one hundred and three; my old man ninety-two. I figure I've got some good years left." She talked all the way to LaGuardia. When they got there she said he was clean, no tail, and he believed her without question.

"I owe you, Sandy," he said.

"Yeah. Give us a call when you can. See ya."

He checked in at the Delta counter; they were flying as Mr. and Mrs. Brian Posner. He made his way to the departure gate, Delta flight to Louisville, then a regional carrier to Paducah. Fifteen minutes later, when Constance walked in, a small knot he hadn't known was there loosened in his midsection.

He kissed her. "Problem?" he asked.

"No. A woman stayed with me for a while: two bookstores, three department stores, but somehow I lost her in Bloomingdale's." She was carrying a bulging Bloomingdale's shopping bag. "I bought us some deli sandwiches," she said. "We can get wine and bad coffee on the plane." He kissed her again. A minute later their flight was announced, and they boarded. It was six forty-five.

Airborne, they turned down the offer of food and unwrapped their sandwiches. "What were you doing in a bookstore?" he asked. The plan had been for her to buy him a couple of shirts, some outdoor gear and shoes for her, toothbrushes, stuff like that.

"I thought I should consult *Hortus,*" she said, and took a bite of sandwich.

He glowered at her, then started to eat. She would tell him in her own time, her own way, and the sandwich was great, a real New York deli creation that no one else could get right. Roast beef, sharp cheese, sharp mustard, pickle . . .

Eventually she told him. "Ortiz described the garden the Mexican priest — not a priest, but a monk — created out of the desert. The man was a world traveler; he collected plants, seeds, cuttings, tubers, bulbs from everywhere and made them grow. That was to be his mission in St. Louis, to create a garden. And Willy said he put stones on the graves, *in* the graves, actually. Stones. Bulbs.

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They might have survived. So I decided *Hortus* might be better than the dictionary. And it was," she added demurely. "Much better."

He wanted to strangle her. "You plan to tell me, or just tease?"

"I'm telling you," she said in mock indignation. *"Hortus,* as you well know, is the Bible of the plant world, the encyclopedia of plants. It has a very long list of common names as well as the official names of just about everything that grows. I found angels dancing, Charlie." When she looked at him, her eyes were dancing, too. "Put this stuff on your tray so I can get rid of mine and I'll show you. I bought a flower book."

They shifted things and she brought the book out of the shopping bag and opened it at a bookmark. She read, "*'Dierama pendulum,* sometimes called angel's fishing rod . . .'" She skipped down and read again, "'The stems are narrow and wiry, invisible from a distance, and with the slightest breeze the flowers appear to be dancing in the air . . .' They came from South Africa, and they grow from bulbs," she added. "Stones."

He was looking at her in awe, she realized. "Elementary," she murmured, and retrieved her wine from his tray. He laughed.

The rest was so simple, he was amazed that no one had done this many years ago. In Paducah they visited the county extension office where they said they were photographers on the trail of anomalous plants, wildflowers out of place, and they were given maps that would have led them to colonies of Mayapples, to lady-slipper orchids, to peltiphylum, and arisaema, and that directed them to two naturalized swatches of dieramas.

"With any luck, they might still be blooming," the young woman told them at the desk in the county office. "It's cutting it close though. And it's illegal to pick them, you understand."

They assured her they would do no picking. Then they drove twenty-seven miles out of Paducah, parked at the side of the road, and started to hike. On one side corn was over their heads already; on the other tall cattails and sedges marked the start of the marsh. They skirted the marshy ground at first, then the trail led through the marsh, out again, and after two more miles, they came to a stop and stared. The angel's fishing rods covered the ground, three hundred feet deep and fifty feet or more wide. The marsh limited them in one direction, and rocky ground in the other. The bright red flowers nodded and dipped and danced in the air.

"I'll be damned," Charlie said in a low voice. Constance reached

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for him and they stood holding hands watching the angels dance.

Back at the car Charlie studied the map. "Let's leave the other one for tomorrow," he said. That trail was four and a half miles, too much walking for one day. "There's a state park somewhere. . . . Ah, here. Let's explore. You want to drive?"

The next day they found they could drive on a one-lane dirt road part of the way to the other patch of angel's fishing rods. The road ended at a trail that made up the edge of the corn fields. This was the trail they had marked on their 1904 map as a possible route the small group of men had followed. Another trail led straight ahead through straggly corn; the ground was getting spongier; they had reached the marsh again. After another mile on foot they stopped to gaze at several acres of red flowers dancing in the breeze. Although the trail skirted the mass of flowers, they did not follow it any farther. The grave would be close to this end, they both knew. The dieramas were on their left, marsh on the right.

"Okay," Charlie said, pleased. "Okay. Now we need to hole up somewhere and plot out the next couple of weeks." He was grinning broadly.

Five days later, on a Saturday afternoon, he and Constance met again with Webber and Ortiz, this time on a bench in Central Park. "Let's take a walk," Charlie said. A jazz band was playing. They edged in closer until the music was loud all around them.

"Have you decided about the sculpture?" he asked bluntly.

"We have," Webber said. "Together we will deliver it to a neutral party and let the decision come from him. Not someone from Mexico or Central or South America."

"And not connected with the Church," Ortiz added.

"Right. Okay. Now listen, and listen good; they might be getting a fix on us already. Webber, next Sunday night at nine you will go to an art show opening. Go by taxi. Walk straight through to a sign that says Employees Only, and enter. Two guys will be in there. One of them will say, 'Don't cry.' If no one says that, take off, enjoy the art, and go home. If he does, then you do exactly what he tells you. Without quibbling, without questions. Got it?"

"I'll have to check my calendar," Webber said, then nodded hastily. "Of course. I'll do it, exactly what you've said."

"Right." Charlie gave him the name of the gallery and its address. "Mr. Ortiz, on Sunday night you will arrange a dinner party at a certain restaurant. Get there by eight. At exactly nine, excuse yourself, apologize for having to leave, and make your way

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to the men's room in the basement. There will be two guys there, with the same message, 'Don't cry.' Follow directions exactly. No password, just leave, finish your dinner, go home."

Ortiz's eyes were shining. He grinned at Webber and nodded. "But of course."

"Okay. Can either of you arrange to have a private plane at Newark Airport that night?"

Webber said quickly, "It will be there. We're to be spirited away, aren't we? Where to?"

Charlie ignored his question. "When you get the pilot lined up, give him this number to call and ask for Butch. And tell him he's to do exactly what Butch tells him. Again, no questions, no quibbling. Just do exactly what he's told. Got it?" He handed Webber a slip of paper with a number where Brian would pick up the phone. "He's to call at seven on Sunday night. After seven-thirty no one will answer and the whole thing's off. And he's to talk to no one."

Both Webber and Ortiz looked like kids about to place a whoopie cushion on the principal's chair. Charlie sighed. "Let's walk. There's more." A trumpet solo had silenced the crowd listening to the New Orleans jazz band.

They walked and stopped when the band got loud, and he told them what else he wanted, and they walked some more. Finally, he said, "This is going to get pricey, but I plan to do exactly what you hired me to do: find the treasure and get it into your hands, without government interference, without appraisals, without Rob Rob. Are we going to haggle over expenses?"

"Four million dollars' worth?" Webber muttered.

"Nowhere near, but pricey."

Without hesitation Webber and Ortiz agreed not to question the price.

"Are you going to remember everything I've said? You want to go over it again?" They walked some more, and finally separated. On Central Park South Charlie made a thumbs-up gesture, certain that DeWilde's men had caught it, Rob Rob's crew had caught it, and Brian had caught it.

On Sunday night they went to a party, a big, noisy affair, the sort of party where people drifted in, drifted out, where drinks and hors d'oeuvres were plentiful, where some coke was available. She was wearing a simple long black dress, very little makeup, as usual, and nice pearls. He was in a dark suit with a red tie. They knew a few of the people there and mingled, nibbled, sipped

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drinks. At ten minutes before ten she drifted down a hallway where the bathroom was, with another small room opposite it. She entered the small room, and after only a second or two Charlie entered also. Another couple was already present. Swiftly, without speaking, Charlie and Constance began to strip off their clothes. The woman put on the black dress, which fitted her perfectly; she put on the pearls. Her hair was short, blond, sleek, her makeup exactly like Constance's. The effect was uncanny, Charlie thought, pulling a black turtleneck over his head. He put on jeans, and they were done. The other couple had become Constance and Charlie in five minutes.

At ten o'clock the other couple left the party by the back door and were picked up by a green Honda. This time four cars played tag with the Honda, and this time, although Sandy took a roundabout way, she made certain she lost none of them. She did not talk all the way to LaGuardia.

At ten-thirty, Constance, wearing a wig of blond permed hair, in a red spangly dress that left her back bare to the waist, leaned against a tall pale man who was running his fingers up and down her spine. He put his lips to her ear and whispered, "How did they look?"

She giggled and mock-pushed him away. "Perfect."

He began to draw her toward the door; she wobbled just a bit as they left the party. On the sidewalk, with her still leaning against him, he looked up and down the street, and at that moment a taxi turned the corner, came their way, and stopped. Two men and a woman, all laughing, got out. The woman said, "Hey, Drew, you leaving already? Hey, it's your party!"

"Duty calls," he said. "I'll be back." He put Constance in the taxi and got in beside her. The woman laughed, and the trio entered the building.

The taxi pulled away from the curb and Constance sat up straight. "They were absolutely perfect," she said.

"You put on a pretty good act yourself," Drew said. "You ever want a job, you know the rest."

He was Drew Anaxis — a patently made-up name that he had picked once when quite stoned — but he had grown to like it. He was a very good director. He had said sincerely to Charlie, "Guerrilla theater! Shit, real guerrilla theater! I love it!" Then he had said, "Can you get me a video of all the principals? You can do that and I'll get the actors." Charlie had done his part; Drew had done his.

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Ten minutes later Charlie left, by way of the roof and a fire escape. This was the only dangerous part of the plan, he thought, walking on Tenth. After two blocks he got in a low black MG idling at the curb, with Brian at the wheel.

The rest stop on Interstate 287 was always busy, but that night it was busier than usual. A very large RV pulled in early and parked. Two unmarked vans pulled in close to it, parked. Soon a little MG drove in. A farm truck carrying bales of straw was next. Then a battered old Buick, closely followed by a taxi.

Webber emerged from the Buick, Ortiz from the farm truck, both dressed in workmen's clothing; they entered the RV. Drew kissed Constance on the cheek and left again in the taxi, to return to his party, flushed and triumphant. Charlie and Brian hitched the MG to the RV. The two men who had arrived in the RV went to the two vans, were admitted, and the vans drove away. The whole thing was done without conversation, without consultation.

Then, inside the RV, Charlie grinned at Constance. "You're a knockout in that outfit," he said. He looked at Ortiz, whose eyes were shining with excitement, and Webber, who was flushed. "You did a good job," he said. "This will be our home for the next few days. You'll find other clothes in the little closet back there. We're completely self-contained, shower, cooking facilities, toilet, everything. We can sleep six, but, as you see, we are five, so it won't be too uncomfortable. Now I advise you to rest if you can. We have a long drive ahead of us."

"Where are we going?" Webber asked, almost timidly.

"Tell you when we get there," Charlie said. "I'll start driving, then Brian, then Constance. We'll stop for gas, and that's all. When we stop, Brian will take care of things; no one else will get out. And when we stop, keep the curtains drawn. Okay? Questions?"

They had plenty of questions, he knew, but at the moment, they were too intimidated, or too awed to ask them. He went to the driver's seat and studied the console a moment, turned the key, and started. He was humming softly.

Charlie drove into the state park outside Paducah the next night at ten. Constance was in the passenger seat beside him. She patted his leg when he turned off the key. End of act one, they were thinking.

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The next morning they explored the park. They were in the section reserved for trailers, campers, RV's, and the spaces to the right and left were vacant. Charlie had reserved them, too, for the vans. A small group of young people had a spot closer to the river, and they were already splashing and laughing by nine in the morning; another RV was several spaces away in the other direction. Charlie and Brian unhitched the MG.

At ten the vans drove in. Webber went to one to consult with his crew, and Ortiz went to the other one; Brian huddled with his two drivers briefly. Some of the diggers had on T-shirts printed with the words *Bill's Bowlers,* and a set of pins. Their story was that they were on their way to a bowling tournament, and in no rush to get there.

"Okay," Charlie said, after Webber, Ortiz, and Brian returned to the RV. "We take the two men with dowsing rods. I'll drive the MG, and Brian will drive the van and follow me." Both Webber and Ortiz were nearly quivering with excitement as they hurried to one of the vans and got in. "Inventory check out?" Charlie asked Brian then; he nodded. If it hadn't, Charlie would have sent someone back to Paducah to complete the shopping list.

"So, let's do it," Charlie said; he and Constance got in the MG and he pulled out of the park with the van following. "How do they strike you?" he asked Constance.

She had watched Brian teach them both how to play pinochle. "Ortiz didn't care one way or the other; his heart wasn't in it. But Webber's an aggressive player, aggressive to the point of carelessness. He wants to win. I think it's all that football in his past."

He grinned. Soon they were at the turnoff; he signaled and made the turn onto the narrow dirt road. It was a tight fit for the van; he had thought it wouldn't be able to drive in as far as the MG, and he had been right. Well, he thought, that's why Brian was driving it. He'd stay with the van, the others would have to walk an extra mile, and that was appropriate, he decided. Would they go the extra mile for the loot? When he stopped and got out to tell them the bad news, he kept a straight face. It was a sultry hot day already.

"We can drive," Webber said. "Who's going to notice if a few corn stalks get knocked down?"

"You know the ground rules," Charlie said. "When we leave this place, it's going to look as if no one's been here since the Flood. Come on, out with you."

Driving again, he could see them in the rearview mirror, two

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men with equipment in cases and Webber and Ortiz trudging on the narrow track.

"Don't laugh," Constance said.

"I'm not laughing."

"Oh yes, you are."

They came to the trail where even the MG couldn't go and waited for the others to catch up, then walked the rest of the distance. The day grew hotter, a sullen kind of heat that was without a breeze, and so humid that sweat simply piled up on itself. Even Constance was sweaty and flushed and she never looked anything but cool. No one was speaking when they reached the beginning of the field of red dieramas, which were in motion although the air seemed completely still.

Webber gazed ahead miserably; he was not in good shape apparently, or was unduly sensitive to the heat. But Ortiz exhaled and said something under his breath in Spanish, then in English. "Dancing angels."

"Right," Charlie said. "Okay, the drill is that we four stay on the trail, and the two with the gizmos start looking. Start close to the trail and work in, guys, and try not to trample any more than you have to."

They began to unpack their gear, which looked very complicated and heavy, with shoulder harnesses and double handles. Charlie had had a metal detector as a kid; it had weighed less than a pound. He had found some change, an old rusty watch, two spoons, and then he had sold the thing to another kid for two dollars, and had come out ahead. For a minute or two he watched the two pros, and did not envy them for a second; then he joined Constance in the shade of ten-foot-tall cattails.

The dieramas were like daffodils, Constance had said; after they bloomed, the leaves would gradually turn brown and wither until the following year. A lot of grass was growing in the field; it would hide their traces, he hoped. Grass was tough, it would spring back after the first rain.

Webber came near and said truculently, "I thought you said you found the graves. This could take a week."

Charlie didn't bother to respond.

"Why here? What led you here?" Webber demanded.

Ortiz said, "The Spanish letter. See, it took all of us to name the elephant."

Webber looked at him in disgust and turned to watch the two men with the metal detectors. They were moving with painful

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slowness, every step deliberate, measured, keeping their eyes on dials or something.

It took over an hour before one of them raised his hand. Charlie got to his feet to watch as the men consulted, then began to sweep their detectors back and forth in a small area. Webber started to move toward them; Charlie caught his arm.

"They know what to do," he said. "Leave them alone."

After another few minutes both men looked at the watching group and nodded. Working together, one using the detector, they marked the area with thin stakes that vanished in the grass and leaves but would show up clearly under infrared light. Then they rejoined the group on the trail.

"Three and a half feet down," one of them said, repacking his equipment. "It'll be a cinch."

They started the hike back to the van.

At the MG they separated. "You guys go on back to the park and cool down," Charlie said. "We'll be along in an hour or so. No point in arousing suspicion by going out together, returning together."

"I'll have a swim," Ortiz said. "A long cool swim."

In the little car, Charlie turned on the air conditioner and drew in a grateful breath. "We'll give them time to get out and take off," he said, his head back, eyes closed, relishing the cool air. "You brought the binoculars, didn't you?"

She had, one for each of them.

They drove to the end of the state road and parked, then walked to a wooded area overlooking the Mississippi River. They both began scanning the river. Downstream and on the other side was the houseboat, a crew member on deck, no one else in sight. Farther down was a fishing boat, apparently anchored; Charlie grinned. The boat had an antenna that was not the usual sort of thing for a boat of that sort. It was rocking in the wake of a tug pushing a string of cargo vessels riding low in the water. In the other direction he spotted another houseboat, smaller than the one at the dock, but much fancier. On the deck of that one he made out Rob Rob and two other men, all stripped down to shorts, sitting under a canopy, drinking. Rob Rob's shorts had big bright Georgia O'Keefe poppies. Another fishing boat was closer to the Kentucky side; it too had a peculiar antenna. He laughed.

Bill's bowlers had a cookout that evening; they sang and played guitars for an hour or so, then they went inside the two vans and were quiet. The other RV, occupied by a retired couple in their

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seventies, became dark by ten. The group near the river stayed up a little longer, but by eleven the park was completely dark and quiet.

The plan was to go in both vans, leave Constance and Brian in the RV, and be in and back out before dawn. There was an opaque tent to raise—they would need light to work by and couldn't risk being seen—a nursery cart with a sheet of canvas to haul stuff in and out, tarps for the dirt, pallets on runners to put the tarps on to avoid mashing the surrounding plants too much, two big bags of pumice rock to put back in the grave to keep it level when refilled. Pumice, Charlie had insisted, because it would fill the space, and it weighed very little. Let future archaeologists puzzle it out. First they would section off the area and dig out the plants, put them aside, then dig the graves, retrieve the items, refill the graves, replace the plants, and try to leave no blatant trace of activity.

They started at eleven thirty. Try to get some sleep, Charlie had said to Constance; he had napped several hours earlier. She stretched out on one of the narrow beds and closed her eyes and after a time actually dozed. Across the RV, Brian was snoring softly. It was one o'clock. She dozed again. Two. Three. At four-thirty she heard the first van arrive.

"Brian," she said softly. He came awake fast. Then, very quietly, men opened the van doors. They heaved two large, dirty bundles into the RV; they smelled like earth, like graves. Webber and Ortiz were right behind them, exultant. Charlie, following, looked exhausted.

"Bed," he ordered when Webber started to move toward a bundle. "We'll get to it later. Brian will be up and awake to keep an eye on things."

He grinned at Constance, then fell into one of the little beds, and to all appearances was asleep instantly. After a moment Webber and Ortiz also groped their ways to their beds. This time when Constance closed her eyes she fell into a deep sleep.

The material encasing the treasure had long ago rotted away; they had found the pieces and bones all mixed together, and the pieces were encrusted with dirt. But even so, Constance thought, watching the division, even so, it was obvious that this was a priceless treasure trove. Webber was holding a solid-gold cross eighteen inches high, inlaid with precious stones. He put it on his canvas wrap. Ortiz was holding a small gold raft, with three

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human figures on it, intricately worked, one holding a spear. He put it on his side without dispute. A silver chalice with a gold band inlaid with emeralds, Webber's. A grotesque gold figure of something inhuman, Ortiz's. A few pieces were disputed and laid aside for now. But for the most part there was little disagreement until they started on the pieces they had set aside.

They were arguing about a silver, footed bowl when Charlie said, "I suggest you settle this in the next ten minutes, or we won't get to the other site and locate the grave before dark. And I intend to be out of here tomorrow."

Webber said, "You can have it, then."

Ortiz put the bowl on his side. They finished soon after that and carefully wrapped their items in canvas. Two men from the diggers came to stay with the bundles, and Brian stayed with them. He was offering to teach them to play pinochle when the group left the RV. They gathered the men with their metal detectors, took one of the vans, and drove to the other site, where they left the driver behind and walked in.

It was as hot as it had been the day before, and the hike was longer, but it didn't take as long to find the grave this time.

That night at dinner, Charlie said, "It isn't going to take all eight guys to dig this one. That thing's only three feet down. I guess Abe was tired of digging graves. We'll take one van, two diggers from each side, one driver. He can't park on that road at that time of night, so he'll have to come back to the park entrance and wait. He can check after two hours, then every hour until we show up at the trail. Let the others get some sleep."

They left at eleven-thirty, as before. Again they stationed two diggers in the RV, and Brian stayed with them, the diggers watching each other, watching the RV, watching the bundles, Brian watching them. Constance knew sleep was impossible. She turned her back on them all and dozed in snatches.

At three-thirty they were back. The cask was intact; the hinges had corroded and fused to seal it. It was filthy, with dirt that seemed to have fused with the teak.

"We'll leave it until daylight," Charlie said tiredly. Neither Ortiz nor Webber seemed satisfied with that, and he nodded to Brian, who slipped out of the RV and returned with his two men, the two who had driven in with the diggers in the vans. "These gentlemen are detectives," Charlie said. "They are armed. Brian and I both need sleep, and I suggest sleep as a good idea for you guys, too. They'll guard your box." He stretched out on his bed. After a

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moment, Webber lay down, then Ortiz did. It was a long time before Constance fell asleep, surrounded as she was by a pack of men with guns.

At nine the diggers carried the two big bundles to the vans. One of them produced a crowbar and then Webber, Ortiz, and Constance watched Charlie force the box open. Webber made a choking sound, and Ortiz was whispering to himself.

A golden head lay on a decayed fragment of cloth. The head was clean and perfect. The eyes were dark green, jade perhaps, with pupils of black onyx, and on both cheeks flawless cabochon emeralds were inlaid. The emeralds diminished in size as they descended.

"Christ's Tears," Webber said hoarsely.

"No!" Ortiz cried. "You saw the images of our gods, grotesqueries, monstrosities, because the gods are grotesque and monstrous. No, this is no god. This is a man, a human being. You saw the photograph of the crystal skull, carved from a single quartz crystal; this is the companion piece. Not a god! A weeping man. Perhaps he weeps because of the cruelty of the gods." Tears were on his cheeks. Reverently he touched the gleaming head.

"Don't touch it!" Webber screamed. He lunged at Ortiz, and almost casually Constance reached out, caught his wrist, and put him down on the floor.

"You had no intention of handing it over to a neutral party, did you?" Charlie asked, just as casually. Webber, on the floor, looked stunned and furious.

"Take it, Mr. Ortiz. Get in your van and go. Remember, Rob Rob has a contract with you two. I wouldn't rush into print about this. Six months, a year. That's plenty of time, and you don't ever have to say a word about how you came upon it. I'll need a couple of days to tidy up around the edges, so stay out of sight two, three days. Okay?"

Webber scrambled to his feet, looked at Constance, and edged away from her toward the door. "He can't! We have an agreement. You can't give it to him!"

"I just did," Charlie said. He nodded to Ortiz. "I suggest you beat it, like right now. Can you carry it alone?"

Ortiz looked stricken. He opened his mouth; no sound emerged. He lifted the head in the box and backed toward the door. Webber tried to grab him, but this time Charlie was in the way, and Charlie was holding his old police revolver. Ortiz fled. Seconds later

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they heard a van drive away fast. It was followed swiftly by a pounding on the RV door.

"Brian and his guys are out there keeping the peace," Charlie said. "I suggest you let your guys know things are okay before war breaks out. You know how it is with peacekeepers; they seem to end up in the thick of things no matter what they intend."

Webber rushed to the door and yanked it open. His diggers were massed outside the RV; Brian's men were at the van, leaning against it lazily.

"Tell them to relax," Charlie said. "Then close the door."

"I'll be out in a couple of minutes," Webber said in a thick voice that was hardly recognizable.

"What you're going to do," Charlie said then, "is write a letter to a priest, a bishop, anyone like that in the vicinity, and tell him to keep your newly arrived van under guard until you get there, and to feed and bed down the men who brought it. Relax, Webber, as far as I could tell you got the best of the deal overall. You ended up with most of the loot."

Webber shook his head. "You think I'd cooperate in any way with you after this?"

"You have a choice," Charlie said thoughtfully. "See, I said I intend to take off, and I mean it. Today. Brian's guys can take that van to the nearest dump and leave it, for all I care. Or they can take the stuff to a pawnshop. The van, this rolling house, the little car, we're all leaving. You and your guys, you can all stay here. Or you can write the letter, tell your men where to take the van, and eventually go there yourself to explain things. Your choice."

Webber's eyes narrowed. "I'll bring charges against you, Meiklejohn. I'll see you in prison for this."

Charlie laughed. "You're going to tell DeWilde about the treasure? Let him appraise your loot? Tell Rob Rob? He thinks he has a contract with you, remember? He could get sore."

Webber glared at him with hatred. Abruptly he sat down.

"Louisville? You know anyone in Louisville? Or St. Louis? It shouldn't be too far away," Charlie said.

After a long pause Webber muttered, "Louisville."

Half an hour later the second van drove away, with Brian's two men as passengers as far as Louisville. "They'll make sure it gets there okay," Brian said to Webber, who was too furious to respond. As soon as the van was gone, Charlie said it was time for some lunch.

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"When are we leaving?" Webber demanded. "You can't hold me; that's kidnapping."

"I'm not holding you," Charlie said, rummaging in the small refrigerator. "You can take off whenever you want. Long hike to Paducah, though."

At three o'clock he said it was time to go. "We'll drive the MG, and you can follow with Brian," he said cheerfully. He drove west, toward the Mississippi again, and stopped at the same place as before near the woods. Brian pulled in and he and Webber got out and came to the MG.

"Now what?" Webber snapped.

"Show time," Charlie said. "There are extra binoculars in the RV, if you want to watch."

Armed with binoculars, they walked in among the trees to find good theater seats. The river was brown; river traffic was up, with two strings of cargo vessels in sight, both heading south. The fancy little houseboat was in place; today Rob Rob was not in sight. The two funny fishing boats were in place, to all appearances unmanned. No one was in sight on the big houseboat at dock. Charlie scanned the low eroded bluff behind the dock: ocher-colored mud with no vegetation, gaps here and there, a trickle of water flowing in one of them. He knew exactly where to watch for the actors; he had mapped that side precisely, had told them where to go, where to dig, when to return.

Then the mime show started. The other Charlie and Constance appeared in one of the gaps. She was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with a pink streamer, he had a sombrero. Charlie grinned. Maybe he'd buy a sombrero; he liked the way it looked on him.

Behind the first two, Drew slouched along. He had darkened his skin, and had dreadlocks now. He was muddy from head to foot; each step seemed an effort, the mud was so thick on his boots. Now men dragging a makeshift sled came into view. On the sled were bulky bundles of something wrapped in mud. They struggled with it. At the houseboat, four men grasped handles and lifted a stretcher from the sled, and staggered aboard. A second group was arriving close behind them, toiling with another sled, another stretcher, this group followed by the other Ortiz and the other Webber. Everyone was coated with mud.

Drew went to the rear of the houseboat where he began hosing off his legs and boots. The others followed him. Someone yelled

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something, and Drew opened two gates on the fencing around the rear deck, began hosing mud off the flooring into the river. The men with the stretchers made their way to the same area and turned the bundles off the stretchers onto the floor. After that it got a bit hard to follow the action.

The houseboat was tilting slightly with all that weight suddenly on the rear deck: thirteen people, a ton of junk. The deck was awash with muddy water, the bundles were slimy with wet clay mud. One of the men rose slowly from tipping the bundle off the sled, and he was pushed by someone else and came up swinging. Someone pushed someone else; someone slipped in the mud and went down. Both bundles began to slide, but no one noticed. Drew was still holding the hose; he began to throw water all around wildly, apparently trying to get to the faucet to turn it off. Other people fell; there was more shoving and pushing and punching. The bundles slid inexorably toward the open gates. Too late, the other Webber made a lunge for one, and might have inadvertently given it a nudge instead of stopping its momentum. It slipped over the side, the second one followed. Everyone froze in a tableau of horror.

The fancy little houseboat had begun to move toward the big one. Then engines were cut; it drifted, stopped. Rob Rob was at a rail, again wearing only shorts with blazing red poppies. His face was turned away, but his body language was eloquent. He raised both fists, pounded the rail, turned, and staggered. Two men tried to catch him; he was too heavy. He hit the deck, and one man ran inside; the other was trying to get something into Rob Rob's mouth. The houseboat turned and picked up speed, running back to Cairo.

"My, my," Charlie murmured, and turned his attention to the two fishing boats. One was speeding toward the dock, faster than fishing boats usually moved; the other one was holding its position. He could see DeWilde on the forward deck, speaking into a telephone.

When he looked at the houseboat again, the other Webber, Ortiz, and the captain were at the rail, the gates were closed, various diggers were sitting about dejectedly. The captain was shaking his head. The other Charlie and Constance vanished into a cabin; Webber and Ortiz went somewhere out of sight; the captain said something to a crew member, and they began preparations to untie the boat at its mooring. Minutes later the houseboat was pulling away from the dock; it made a long slow turn, and started north.

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Charlie put his arm around Constance's shoulders, grinning. Webber and Brian moved from their trees where they had been watching. Brian looked like a merry jack-o'-lantern, his face split by a mammoth grin.

"My God," Webber said. "My God, those people! Who are those people? It was like seeing a Doppelgänger!"

Charlie gave Constance a final squeeze and they started back toward the car and the RV. "Mr. Webber," he said, "there are some things about this whole operation you'll never know. But now you know what happened on that houseboat. I suggest that you and Ortiz get together over a beer and you let him in on it, just in case anyone ever asks a question."

They stopped at the MG. "DeWilde will have a crew check out where the digging happened over there," Charlie said. "They'll find that you folks exhumed everything, bones, treasure, every scrap. He'll have divers in the river in a day or two, no doubt. If Rob Rob is still capable of doing anything, he'll have his own divers out there. You might want to pretend an interest for a time. Or not. Suit yourself. Just stay out of sight for a couple of days, give all those folks time to fade out of sight. DeWilde and Rob Rob will be busy, they won't be on your case."

Webber looked disbelieving. "They think the items are in the river," he said, as if he had to sort this out in his head. Then, "What was in those bundles? What will their divers find?"

Charlie laughed and opened the passenger door of the MG. "Rocks, dirt, mud. A scrap of burlap. Who knows what's in that river?" He handed the keys to Constance. "You want to drive? It's a fun little car." Then he said to Webber, "Brian will take you to Louisville. I'll send a bill in a few days."

Webber turned to leave, then he swung around again and held out his hand. "Meiklejohn, thanks. I think I've been witness to a miracle. Thanks."

Constance got behind the wheel and adjusted the seat, the mirror. Brian left with Webber in the RV, and she pulled out onto the road.

"Another fifty grand coming," Charlie commented happily. He started to hum.

But she knew it hadn't been for the money. She had watched Rob Rob collapse. She knew why he had done it, and she did not say a word. ●

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BY MARLYS MILLHISER

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BY PETER TURNBULL

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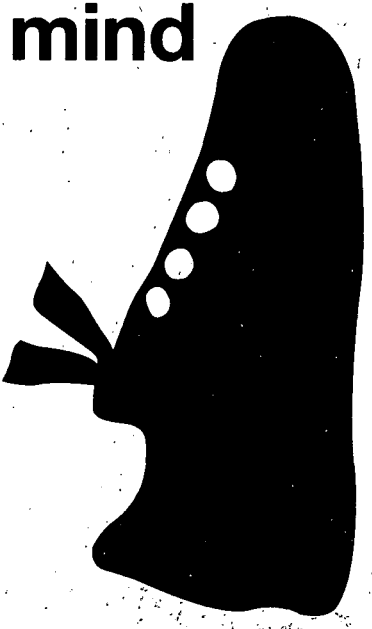

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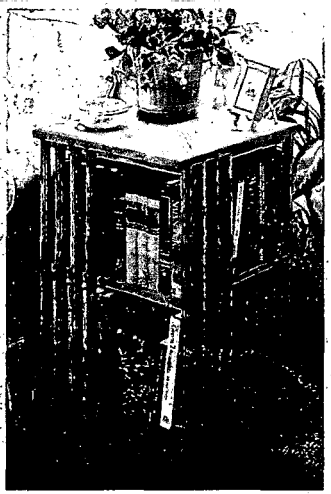

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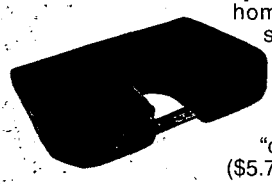

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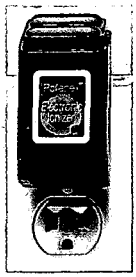

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